The New Criterion

December 2002

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Italian Sculpture

From the Gothic to the Baroque

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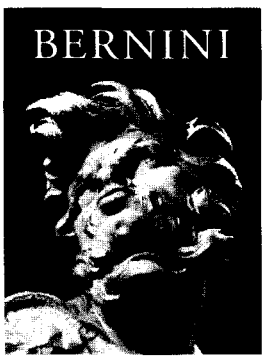
Salander-O'Reilly Publishing

Italian Sculpture: from the Gothic to the Baroque

Published to accompany Salander-O'Reilly's exhibition of the same name, *Italian Sculpture: from the Gothic to the Baroque* features thirty objects from the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Italian sculpture ever held in New York City. Lavishly illustrated in color with breathtaking photographs, the catalogue by Andrew Butterfield and Anthony Radcliffe includes essays by an international team of the leading experts in the field and features major works by some of the most important artists of the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. Artists from the Trecento include Tino di Camaino, the leading exponent of Gothic sculpture in Italy and sculptor to the Royal House of Anjou in Naples, and Nino Pisano, a preeminent figure in Tuscan sculpture of the third quarter of the century. The core group of major fifteenth-century Florentine sculptors is represented, including Luca della Robbia, Antonio Rossellino, Desiderio da Settignano, Benedetto da Maiano, and Agostino di Duccio, as well as an important group of non-Florentine sculptors, such as Neroccio de'Landi and Giovanni Antonio Amadeo. The artists of Medicean Florence who worked at the court of Grand Duke Cosimo I are the focus of the sixteenth century section and include Baccio Bandinelli, Francesco da Sangallo, Niccolò Tribolo, Giorgio Vasari, Raffaello da Montelupo, Vincenzo de' Rossi, and Valerio Cioli. The catalogue concludes with Gian Lorenzo Bernini's recently rediscovered *Modello for the Fountain of the Moor* (c. 1653), the presentation model for his celebrated fountain at the southern end of the Piazza Navona in Rome. A work of dazzling brilliance, Bernini's modello is accompanied a second exhibition catalogue titled *Bernini: the Modello for the Fountain of the Moor*. 176 pages.

Bernini: the Modello for the Fountain of the Moor



One of two catalogues published to accompany Salander-O'Reilly's exhibition *Italian Sculpture: from the Gothic to the Baroque, Bernini: the Modello for the Fountain of the Moor* focuses on Gian Lorenzo Bernini's recently rediscovered model for his celebrated fountain at the southern end of the Piazza Navona in Rome. Made in 1653 as the presentation model for the patron of the fountain, the *modello* is both the largest terracotta sculpture by Bernini known today and the only autograph statue of a nude male from the latter part of the artist's career. Lavishly illustrated in color, the catalogue by Andrew Butterfield contains in-depth, scholarly essays by Charles Avery, who examines the history of the fountain; Mark Weil, who discusses the attribution and interpretive character of the *modello*; and Anthony Sigel, who gives a detailed account of how it was made. 76 pages.

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James Castle

Structures

James Castle in Garden Valley, Idaho, circa 1976 Courtesy J Crist Gallery

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The New Criterion *December 2002*

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Notes & Comments: December 2002

Tenured adolescents

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that,
an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"
But it's "Saviour of 'is country"
when the guns begin to shoot; . . .
—Rudyard Kipling, "Tommy" (1890)

We have been reminded of Kipling's poem "Tommy" a good deal lately. Its most famous line—in which Kipling speaks of "makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep"—has a special relevance at a moment when anti-war animus is bubbling out of the universities and other protected redoubts of politically correct sentiment. Living in the aftermath of the 1960s and its culture of protest, most of us have long been inured to the spectacle of privileged adolescents attacking the institutions that guarantee their privileges. We have been inured as well to the spectacle of privileged men and women, middle-aged and older, behaving like those spoiled adolescents. It is only business as usual when a tenured professor rails against capitalism, "the corporations," or the United States military, even though those institutions secure his livelihood and, ultimately, make his tenure possible.

There is, as we say, nothing new in this spectacle. By now, many of us have come to expect professors and indeed the cultural elite generally to act like spoiled adolescents. Often—not always, not everywhere, but frequently—there seems to be an inverse relationship between virtues like patriotism and common sense and the number of years spent at a university or similarly insulated cultural institution (a museum, say, or *The New York Times*, PBS, most major TV news networks . . .). To a large extent, it comes under the capacious category of what Lionel Trilling called "the adversary culture of the intellectuals"—which is to say that, like so much in life, it is disappointing but not surprising.

Well, not usually surprising. Every now and then, however, the animating virulence of this phenomenon shows itself naked, without premeditation, politesse, or the other emollients that civil exchange imposes. And when this happens the result remains no less surprising than disturbing. What we have in mind is a recent exchange between a cadet at the United States Air Force Academy and Peter N. Kirstein, a tenured professor of history at Saint Xavier University in Chicago. At the end of October, the unnamed cadet sent out an email to numerous academics soliciting their participation in a sort of symposium on the theme of "America's Challenges in an Unstable World: Balancing Security with Liberty." Here, in part, is what the cadet wrote:

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> Dear Sir or Ma'am,
>
> The Air Force Academy is going to be having our annual Academy Assembly. This is a forum for mainly but not only Political Science majors, discussing very important issues dealing with politics. Right now we are in the planning stage for advertising and we would appreciate your help in the follow areas. Do you know of or have any methods or ways for interschool advertising and or communications? What would be the best way for us to advertise at your school whether it is sending you the fliers and you making copies or by perhaps putting an advertisement in your local publication? We would appreciate your input and the cost of what you recommend. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Standard-issue fare, no? We're having a conference; we'd like to spread the word; do you have any suggestions? Here is what Professor Kirstein wrote in response:

> You are a disgrace to this country and I am furious you would even think I would support you and your aggressive baby killing tactics of collateral damage. Help you recruit. Who, top guns to reign [*sic*] death and destruction upon nonwhite peoples throughout the world? Are you serious sir? Resign your commission and serve your country with honour.
>
> No war, no air force cowards who bomb countries without AAA, without possibility of retaliation. You are worse than the snipers. You are imperialists who are turning the whole damn world against us. September 11 can be blamed in part for what you and your cohorts have done to the Palestinians, the VC, the Serbs, a retreating army at Basra.
>
> You are unworthy of my support.

Rather takes your breath away, doesn't it?

If you have any doubts about the value of the Internet, consider this: no sooner had Professor Kirstein sent his reply than some public-spirited chap broadcast the exchange by email. It quickly made the rounds—we first heard of it early in November when a friend in Chicago sent us the exchange—and instantly sparked condign outrage. Saint Xavier was flooded with emails, letters, and telephone call from angry cadets, parents, and other concerned citizens. As of mid-November, the front page of the university's web site carried a hand-wringing apology by Richard A. Yanikoski, the president, informing readers that Saint Xavier was reaching out "compassionately to the large number of men and women who somehow received copies of Professor Kirstein's e-mail and thereby came to feel demeaned by his intemperate criticisms." Earth to President Yanikoski: compassion is neither here nor there in this case; there is no "somehow" about how the large number of men and women got that email: it was quickly circulated by people who were outraged by Professor Kirstein's diatribe; and those people were not "demeaned," they were angry: there is a difference.

President Yanikoski seemed surprised that "by far the topic of greatest interest to most people has been the University's response to Professor Kirstein." Imagine that! The good news is that he has been "relieved of his teaching responsibilities for the current semester and reassigned to other duties" and that an administrative reprimand will be placed in his file. It's a start. But a look at Professor Kirstein's college webpage (www.sxu.edu/history/pkirstein) shows that it is unlikely to make much difference. Professor Kirstein publishes his own apology there, which begins:

> Again I would like to apologize to all who are offended, burdened, distracted and hurt by my e-mail to an Air Force Academy cadet. My e-mail, while motivated from a pacifist perspective, was not professional in tone and totally at variance with my usual interaction with students and colleagues.

Of course it is good to know that the tone of Professor Kirstein's missive is "totally at

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variance" with his usual interaction with students and colleagues. But what should we think of the fact that it was "motivated from [*sic*] a pacifist perspective"? What does that tells us about "the pacifist perspective"? And although many people were "offended," and rightly offended, by Professor Kirstein's email, where does being "burdened, distracted and hurt" come into the picture? It belongs in the heap of psychobabble with the President's compassion.

Professor Kirstein's web page lists his teaching interests, which include "Recent U.S. History," "The Nuclear Age," "Vietnam," "Cold War," and "National Security Policy." Any bets as to the content of his courses on those subjects? His web page also carries an eleven-item list elaborating his "teaching philosophy." The first item, in bold face, declares, "Teaching is a moral act." Gosh. Professor Kirstein also goes on to tell us that he seeks to "teach peace, freedom, diversity, multiculturalism and challenge American unilateralism." (How does one teach peace, freedom, etc.? Even if possible, is that what a professor of history is paid to do?) But this list also show that Professor Kirstein is a bit of a comedian: item three announces that he endeavors to "move beyond the ideological confines of academe." In fact, as Professor Kirstein's email demonstrates, he *embodies* the ideological confines of the academy.

Apologies are all well and good. But they are pointless without contrition, and genuine contrition requires a recognition of what one did wrong. Does Professor Kirstein understand what he did wrong? We wonder. In his gracious response to Professor Kirstein's apology, Captain Jim Borders of the Air Force Academy noted that a situation that began with intemperate rhetoric had ended civilly. He was clearly pleased that almost all of the responses his cadets proposed to Professor Kirstein's email were "marked by great maturity and professionalism." The response that best encapsulated the opinion of the cadet wing, he said, came from a textbook they use:

> It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press. It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech. It is the soldier, not the campus organizer, who gives us the freedom to demonstrate. It is the soldier who salutes the flag, who serves beneath the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protester to burn the flag.

Sage words, those. We wonder if Professor Kirstein understands them.

Meanwhile, at Cornell . . .

While Saint Xavier busies itself with damage control over a history professor who cannot distinguish between protest and pedagogy, Cornell University's health service is debating the important question of whether to sell vibrators in its dispensary. "Many students," a college newspaper reports, "feel it would be helpful for Gannett [health center] to have vibrators available because Cornell is located in Ithaca, not a major city." Somjen Frazer, Cornell '03, explained the problem: "At this point, you either go online or go downtown to the sort of scary and not very woman-affirming place sex-shop." Paraphrasing Ms. Frazer, the paper noted that, "as with anything else they sell, the dispensary will give out educational materials explaining how to properly clean a vibrator that two women are going to share and what exactly vibrators can be used for." Yes, we can see how important that would be. Most, though not all, of the students quoted about the proposed innovation were enthusiastic. Sara Jacobs, Cornell '05, confided that "I think one of the most important things is for women to be able to get themselves off. It's better than going to the sketchy shop downtown where they have to check the batteries for you." Perhaps Cornell will offer an elective on changing batteries. It seems the least they can do for—let's see, at last count it was $38,254 all in.

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Starting out

by Alex Katz

This past summer I focused on buttercups in tall green grass. I have been attracted to this motif since the mid-1950s. There is no perfect solution. If I settle for the tone differences, the green becomes dead. If I settle for the correct light, I don't have the tonal difference and the painting becomes conventional. This summer, I transposed the green from the actual color green to a hot yellow-green. I had never done this before. It gave me the tone difference and the all-over light of the field. I was nervous about the yellow-green, but friends liked it. When this painting makes a public appearance, I don't expect very many people to understand my problem, or my solution, or the difficulty in executing it. Actually, I suppose things haven't changed for me that much in that area since the 1950s.

The challenge for me has been to paint a painting that could elicit the response I experienced looking at great paintings. To engage in primary structures of novelty art was, for me, a cop-out. Novelty inventions and gimmicks can have fashion and style but have much less voltage than a great painting. Painting does not need you. You have to need painting. Painting has to become you.

In high school, I was supposed to study advertising, but I came across beautiful antique drawings, and I spent most of my time drawing from antique casts. I became proficient, and realized I could learn something. The antique drawing took a whole week, looking two or three hours every day. The first day you measured distances and placed dots. The second day you connected the dots with lines. The third day you put large masses of light and dark. The fourth day you developed the tones inside the masses. The fifth day you added technique to make it look graceful.

Cooper Union was a romantic Bauhaus school that specialized in "Modern Art." In 1946, people took a test to get in. I was so surprised when I received my acceptance letter that I jumped straight off the stoop. Considering I went to a trade school, I figured that I would catch up to the class and pass them in the middle of the second year. One third had been in the school before World War II, one third were graduates of Music and Art High School, which was essentially a prep school for art, and the remainder came from other backgrounds.

The top students in fine arts at Cooper Union received scholarships and access to the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney. Professor Ray Dowden asked whether I wanted to go to Yale summer school or to The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. William King, whom I knew, went to Skowhegan the previous summer, so I chose Skowhegan. At Skowhegan I tried *plein air* painting and found my subject matter and a reason to devote my life to painting. The sensation of painting from the back of my head was a high that I followed until the present.

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After Skowhegan, two students got a loft on Bleecker Street in New York. It had a wood stove and was cold and rough. Jean Cohen got a cold water flat on East Sixth Street. No contest, I married Jean. She got out of the Five Towns in Nassau and I moved to New York. I really liked it in St. Albans, Queens, but once my Queens friends got married, it was hopeless. We had little in common and the friends in New York were so interesting.

My intention was to make something fresh and post-abstract. I took paintings to dealers uptown wrapped and tied up with clothes line. That's what people did before slides. One dealer, Harry Saltpeter, liked them well enough to put them in a closet. I took them back a year later. The dealer I liked best was Mrs. Kraushaar. She simply said these are too light for my gallery. I got to dislike people who said these are interesting, come back next year.

While in art school I had sold drawings to C. P. Penelis at *Seventeen* magazine, the leading place for modern illustrations, and I was going to be a scratchy line illustrator. In 1949 I figured it would take three years to be a successful illustrator and eight or nine to get established as a painter, and painting was the biggest thrill I ever had. I supported myself with odd jobs, house painting, etc., but settled for frame carving. I spent ten years carving frames two or three days a week. I lived without radiators for twelve years. I spent nothing on doctors, dentists, or clothes. In the 1950s rents were cheap, the cost of living was low. There were a lot of people in the same boat. There were a lot of parties and discussions. I was poor, but as long as I had clean white shirts, ties, movies, bars, and cigarettes, I never felt impoverished. Up to 1957, when I met Ada, it was, despite the intellectual liveliness, the most unstable, unhappy period of my life.

There were two types of art in New York, regional and provincial-modern. Cooper Union was a modern art school and one of the few that had a Bauhaus orientation. One educated there at that time had an advantage in graphics and fine art.

Right after I got out of Cooper, Michael Froelich, of Roko Gallery on Greenwich Avenue, asked me to exhibit a painting. In my last year at Cooper, I developed a style that was negotiable as provincial modern art, influenced by Robert Gwathmy and Morris Kantor, pick-up-sticks cubism with post-war colors. I got a nice mention in the *New York Times* and thought I would conquer the world as I had at Cooper Union.

Michael Froelich invited me a year later to show a painting. I had found Jackson Pollock, and I had found *plein air* painting. The painting I showed was a still life, delicately worked in subtle grays. It was halfway between Cézanne and Cubism. Beauford Delaney had a painting that wiped out the whole gallery. All I could do was laugh! Bill King said he was Grandma Moses on cocaine. I made up my mind that would never happen again, and it hasn't.

In 1950 or 1951, Angelo Ippolito, Charles Cajori, Bill King, and Lois Dodd were talking about opening a cooperative gallery, the Tanager Gallery. There were very few places for young advanced painters to exhibit. It didn't seem like a practical idea to me. In 1954, Michael Froelich asked me to have a one-man show at his gallery on Greenwich Avenue. Frank O'Hara reviewed it for *Art News* and said the work had an "oriental calm." I thought the paintings were wild and open. This was the beginning of an education.

The first painting I showed at the Tanager Gallery was in 1952, of a woman on a porch, in profile. An older painter gave me some advice: "figuration is obsolete and color is French." I said to myself, "to you baby." Actually, I had no idea whether what I was doing was going to find an audience, but my instincts told me there was no other way for me.

I was working for Vincent Maragliotti painting *trompe l'oeil* painting. He was great at painting the Loews Theaters with a broom and he really needed me. He ran down before my show opened and bought one of my best paintings for $75. My first public sale and I think the most money I

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had ever received. Subsequently, Jim Brody, a painter, bought a landscape and that became my record sale.

I came in on Saturday to meet my fans. The gallery was showing Robert Andrew Parker watercolors in folios in the front of the gallery. When people came in to look at my work, and asked if I were the artist, I was embarrassed because if I said I was, it would embarrass them. Some painters I didn't know saw and liked it. But it was the first of five unsuccessful commercial shows that I had. I figured that if I sold the entire show, it wouldn't give me enough money to paint for a season. As a business, it really seemed pointless.

My new paintings were open, free, and representational, or should I say, optical, which meant I had gone from a highly negotiable style to something only painters could get. To regional realists they were unfinished. To modern people they were old-fashioned.

Michael moved up to Madison Avenue and asked me to have another show. This time I was painting the background on a decorative mural by Alan Cox for Mrs. R. H. Dana. I didn't get any paint on the floor and did a perfect job painting. She was too refined to tip me, so she ran over to the gallery and bought the best collage. I still miss it. It must have been $50. So I said so long Michael, a very sweet man.

I thought I might just as well show in a non-commercial gallery. The Tanager Gallery asked me to become a member. At the Tanager Gallery in 1956, the work would be shown with taste that was as good as one could get, and everyone in the live art world would see it. The Tanager Gallery was a cooperative gallery that became a center. There was always someone interesting to talk with in the late afternoons. Angelo Ippolito found a printer with wooden type and invented a new style in gallery typography. He also specialized in hanging large numbers of paintings in the small space. The Christmas shows included every artist around and were presented with taste. When the Tanager started, none of the members had a gallery. By the time it closed, everyone had a gallery. At this time it was commercially profitable, but no longer necessary.

In 1959, at the Tanager Gallery, I had a show of figures on flat grounds. This was the most far out that I had extended myself. I had no idea what reaction it would get. There were those who liked it and others who didn't—but I mean *really* didn't. I was painting calm, pleasant paintings. My reaction to the hostility was, if you don't like this, wait until the next show. I was surprised at the people who came and told me they liked the paintings. Bill DeKooning said they look like photos, but they are paintings, and don't let them knock you away from it. Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, and Bob Rauschenberg were enthusiastic, and we started seeing each other.

In 1962, I had my first cutout show at the Tanager Gallery. Elaine DeKooning bought the Frank O'Hara piece for $300, the biggest sale to date.

The next painting show was at the Stable Gallery on Seventh Avenue in 1960, an elegant space. The show looked great. It established me as a serious painter and was another commercial flop. The artist Joe Fiore bought a small blueberry field and Elinor Ward bought a couple of small interiors. The show did have a spinoff. I was asked to show at the Whitney Museum in an under thirty-five exhibition. Emily Genauer gave me my first bad review. Elinor Ward said it was a pity she didn't go on for a few more inches. Genauer said the paintings were thinly painted and poorly drawn. I wouldn't argue with her. I wasn't trying to make something drawn well or with developed paint. She liked Ben Shahn, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, etc. I was trying to make something alive and new. *Ada in a White Bathing Suit*, *Paul Taylor in a Grey Background*, *10AM* and *4PM* still look fresh.

It takes most painters at least eight or ten years to master the craft and become proficient, and perhaps another eight or ten

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years to become a master. One is able to become an artist in theoretical art right out of art school, or even in art school. A painter can become an artist after eight or ten years, but it doesn't make sense to spend all that time if one is interested in becoming a success. Painting as a career doesn't make sense. Painting is a self-indulgent passion that is not practical. To be a practical painter makes less sense than trying to be a painter. To paint to fit the size of a station wagon, or a living room, or the gallery doesn't make any sense. The size and content of art should be determined by the artist's needs. It is the most practical way to get at art.

The early 1960s produced more interesting art than any time before or since. Much of the early 1960s art was formed in the late 1950s. The diversity was amazing: Malcolm Morley, Andy Warhol, Jim Rosenquist, Al Held, Philip Pearlstein, Ronnie Bladen, Tony Smith, Dan Flavin, Eva Hesse, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselman, Red Grooms, Claes Oldenberg, Larry Rivers. All produced some of their best work during that period.

Art schools didn't offer a training that would enable graduates to move into the contemporary world. Painters generally needed more time than other visual artists. Many of the more interesting artists usually don't emerge until they are well into their thirties or forties. It's much harder, despite the commercial and institutional support, for a painter to develop than when I started. We had a relatively large audience and a low cost of living.

In the late 1950s, colleges and universities expanded their art departments. This gave jobs to artists and greatly increased the art audience. It also made studying art respectable. The selling of art increased a great deal by the end of the 1950s, making it possible to think of having a degree and then a career in art. Galleries and institutions patronized the "avant garde." The old-fashioned art schools didn't have the money to hire instructors or the energy to compete. The art world has expanded. There are a lot of artists, but not a lot of painters. It used to be said that there were one hundred interesting painters. I suppose that would be true today, except that a good proportion of them don't live in New York or the United States.

Abstract Expressionism quickly became an academy in the early 1950s and dominated the modern museums and galleries. It had the good and bad qualities of an academy. Systems requiring skill and taste developed painters, but stifled originality.

Clement Greenberg constructed the next academy—weaker, but an academy. Leo Castelli developed the academy of the "avant garde," which was much stronger than either of the previous academies.

The people who liked my work were painters and poets with very little clout in the institutional art world. I felt I had an élite audience early on and things would get better.

In the fifties and sixties, just about all professional painters got reviewed every time they had a show. Amateurs did not get reviewed. Things started to unravel about fifteen years ago. The pursuit of novelty has led to democracy in action which does not have anything at all to do with committed painting. Painting is not democratic. Some painters have more energy and skill than others. Some painters have more interested audiences. Discrimination is greatly diminished.

The Museum of Modern Art used to be ahead of the artists; the Bonnard show in 1948, the Pollock-Balthus show, the Sixteen Americans show by Dorothy Miller. It was a place from which we all learned. It has become an essentially academic institution and shows a lot of institutional decoration. The recent all-white paintings rooms almost killed the Malevich painting. I remember paintings, movies, and meeting friends in the Museum cafeteria. Now I get depressed the minute I hit the ugly lobby. The new one will have to be an improvement.

However, the Museum of Modern Art has given us some wonderful shows last season and in the recent past. The

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Giacometti and Richter exhibitions were pertinent and engaging. The old master Mondrian exhibition is still vivid in my mind, and the Chuck Close and Robert Ryman shows were memorable.

P.S. 1, the New Musuem, and the DIA Foundation provide an environment for young artists that did not exist in the early days of my art world. P.S. 1 brings live art from all over the world and gives local artists a chance to see their work in a public institution. The attitude of the openings make artists feel it is something to which they belong. It is a great help to maturing young artists and a great help to the city in maintaining itself as an art center.

The Whitney Museum has provided a place for local artists. Its Annuals used to show what was going on across the board. Many people used to think it had a lot of dull art, but we all went, and I found new painters who were interesting and at times inspiring. I loved it on Eighth Street where it was part of the artist community. Times, however, have changed. The Biennials are more homogeneous, in better taste, and much easier to get through, if that's what you want. The exhibitions are more professional. The exhibition of the permanent collection is a big help for the art student and the public. There was nothing like this earlier at the Whitney Museum. It is similar to what the Modern Museum and the Metropolitan provided.

The Metropolitan Museum used to be the best place to see abstract expressionist paintings, although the collection was small, no more than sixteen paintings. They were always on view and there were some real beauties—the Pollock, DeKooning, and Kline, for instance. It has become larger and less special. The proportion of problematic paintings has greatly increased.

When an artist extends himself, his interest can no longer justify the painting, and it's up to others to tell him what he did. I have learned a great deal from critics, starting with my friends, then from dealers, then from professional critics. Painting in one sense is a group effort. One's various publics contribute to the painter's consciousness. Professional criticism is an art form in itself. The discrepancy between where I was and where some critics were led me to read older criticism, and I found that there was much to learn from them. Sainte-Beuve, considered a "bad man," actually is great on Racine and Corneille. His put-down of Balzac has become a model for journalists. You judge the reviewer as he judges you. An English journalist gave me a bad review on a show at the ICA in London. He seemed like a jerk, and I thought it was proper that I received a bad review from him, and that I was likely in good company. I asked Irving Sandler about him, and he said, "Rothko's bad review was much longer than yours." By and large I can say that people who like my work are a better crowd than the people who don't.

I had a two-person show with Jean Cohen at a Cooper Union room on the West side in 1951. My paintings were "all-over" tree paintings. Thomas Hess thought they should be more abstract. This came as a shock. I thought a reviewer would be involved with the painting of my work because that was my principal involvement.

This was the beginning of realizing that people see different paintings. The biggest problem with critics is that they have a morality from another time period with which they judge my paintings. The critics who responded to my work in the 1950s were James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, Edwin Denby, Fairfield Porter. I didn't exist for Meyer Schapiro, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg. Clement Greenberg actually went out of his way to say how lousy I was. Perhaps that meant that I did exist, after all.

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Does abstract art have a future?

by Hilton Kramer

It is hard to tell if abstract painting actually got worse [after the 1960s], if it merely stagnated, or if it simply looked bad in comparison to the hopes its own accomplishments had raised.
—Frank Stella, *Working Space*, 1986

It must be acknowledged at the outset of these observations that the question of whether abstract art has a future is anything but new. The question of abstraction's future has been raised many times in the past. Historically, the question of abstraction's future is as old as abstraction itself, for the birth of abstract art some ninety years or so ago immediately prompted many doubts about its artistic viability. No sooner did abstract art—particularly abstract painting—make its initial appearance on the international art scene in the second decade of the twentieth century than the doubts about its future course began to be heard.

Many good minds have raised such doubts, and many benighted minds have done so as well. There are highly accomplished artists and critics who have taken sides on the question, as well as respected museum curators, art collectors, and art dealers. Over the course of time, in fact, debate about the future of abstract art has been an equal-opportunity enterprise to which the smart and the dumb, the advanced and the reactionary, the informed and the misinformed have all been eager to make a contribution.

I have a particularly vivid memory of an evening in 1954 at the Artists Club in New York when no less an eminence than the late Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, announced that the age of abstraction was drawing to a close and would now be succeeded by, of all things, a revival of history painting. The occasion was a panel discussion on what was then called the "New Realism." It was organized by John Bernard Myers, the irrepressible director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which represented a number of the painters under discussion—among them, Larry Rivers, Fairfield Porter, and Grace Hartigan.

The Artists Club had been founded, of course, as a forum dedicated to the advancement of Abstract Expressionism. It was therefore inevitable that Barr's provocative pronouncement—and indeed, the very subject of the panel—would be greeted with a vociferous mixture of skepticism and hostility. It had clearly been Johnny Myers's intention to create such a stir on that occasion, for he knew very well that public controversy would have the effect of making some of the figurative painters he represented better known to the art world. He also knew that Barr had just acquired Rivers's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, a modernist version of Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's well-known nineteenth-century history painting in the Metropolitan Museum, for MOMA's permanent collection, and could therefore be counted upon to ac-

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claim Rivers's picture as a significant development on the contemporary art scene.

To discuss this controversial development, however, Myers had deliberately convened a panel that could be relied upon to be evenly divided about the significance of Rivers's painting. Joining with Barr in extolling the virtues of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and the shift in direction it was said to represent was Frank O'Hara, already well-established as a poet and art critic. Opposing this view, not surprisingly, was Clement Greenberg. Although he had praised Rivers's earlier work, Greenberg clearly had a low opinion of both *Washington Crossing the Delaware* and Barr's claims on its behalf. Relations between Greenberg and Barr had never been anything but icy, and Greenberg remained, in any case, firm in his often-stated belief that abstraction represented what he characterized as the "master current" of the modernist era.

I was the fourth member of the panel, a newcomer to the art scene whose sole claim to attention on that occasion was an essay I had recently published in *Partisan Review* that was highly critical of Harold Rosenberg's theory of "Action" painting, then a hot topic in the art world. This criticism of Rosenberg, then an arch rival of Greenberg's for the critical leadership of the New York School, had the effect of allying me on the panel with Greenberg even though some exhibition reviews I had lately contributed to *The Art Digest* were unmistakably sympathetic to a wide range of contemporary figurative painting. I didn't think much of Rivers's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, however, and much as I admired Alfred Barr, I didn't believe that a revival of history painting was either imminent or even possible. Like many first-rate art historians, critics, and connoisseurs, Barr was better at codifying the past than at predicting the future.

I mention all this as a reminder that some of the harshest criticisms of abstract art, and some of the direst predictions of its demise, have come from within the ranks of the modernists themselves. In the 1950s, few living persons could rival Alfred Barr in his knowledge and understanding of abstract art, yet he seems genuinely to have come to believe that its end was nigh—and indeed inevitable. In the 1960s, Philip Guston, after winning considerable acclaim as a convert to Abstract Expressionism, won even greater acclaim for loudly denouncing abstraction in favor of a pictorial style derived from comic-strip and other populist images. Then in the 1980s came Frank Stella's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, *Working Space*, with its litany of contemporary abstraction's repeated failures to produce an art that we had any reason to admire. Stella, too, looked to populist imagery for inspiration—in his case, urban graffiti—with results that are depressingly familiar.

Given this checkered history, in which so many gifted people have said so many foolish things about abstract art—and we haven't even mentioned the openly declared enemies of abstraction—why does one feel compelled to raise the question of its future yet again? I think there are several good reasons for doing so. One is that by any objective measure, the place occupied by new developments in abstract art on the contemporary art scene—what we see in the galleries and museums and read about in the mainstream press and in the art journals—by this measure, the place occupied by new developments in abstract art is now greatly diminished from what it once was.

In this country, certainly, you have to go back to the 1950s and 1960s to recall a time when new developments in abstract art had shown themselves to have the effect of transforming our thinking about art itself. This is what Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich and others accomplished in the early years of abstract art. It was what Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning, and others in the New York School accomplished in the 1940s and 1950s. And, for better or for worse, it was what Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and certain other Minimalists accomplished in the 1960s.

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I don't myself see anything comparable to this group impact on aesthetic thought happening at the present moment. I haven't observed anything of comparable magnitude occurring in the realm of abstract art since the 1960s. Let me underscore here that I am speaking about group impact on aesthetic thought, about art movements and not about individual talents. I am speaking about the impact of abstract art—or more specifically, abstract painting—on cultural life. That kind of impact on cultural life can rarely be achieved by an individual talent working in isolation from a group of like-minded, or similarly-minded, talents.

I think there is a reason why the place occupied by abstract art is now so radically diminished not only on the contemporary art scene but in cultural life generally. At least I have an hypothesis as to the cause or causes of the diminished power and influence that abstraction has suffered since the acclaim it met with and the spell it cast in the 1960s. And let me be clear once again about what I mean in speaking of abstraction's diminished powers. I mean its power to set the kind of agenda that commands the attention of new and ambitious talents—and at times, indeed, even the emulation of established talents.

Before speculating about the causes of this diminution in what may be called, for want of a better name, movement abstraction, I think it important to recall something that has been central to the aesthetic history of abstraction itself—specifically, its inevitably symbiotic relation to representational art. As all of us know (but sometimes forget), abstract art—especially abstract painting—derives, aesthetically, from representational painting. Whatever the degree of purity abstraction can be said to attain, it cannot make claim to a virgin birth. If abstract painting could be said to have a genetic history, its DNA would instantly reveal its debt to some representational forebear. Whether abstraction derives from Cubism or Impressionism or Fauvism or Neo-Impressionism or Expressionism or some combination of these developments, its antecedents are traceable to the aesthetic vitality of representational painting. This is true of abstract sculpture, too—for abstract sculpture comes out of abstract painting—specifically, Cubism and Cubist collage.

In my own speculations about the fate which movement abstraction has suffered in our own day, two specific developments seem to nominate themselves as the cause or causes of our current impasse. The larger and more general cause is the fate of painting itself—its fate as a factor in cultural life generally as well as in the life of art. If we look back on two recent developments—the series of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art called "MOMA 2000" and the transformation of the Tate Gallery in London into two really bizarre institutions—Tate Britain and Tate Modern—we are obliged to recognize two things: (1) that on both sides of the Atlantic, abstract art has been marginalized by the institutions that were formerly in the vanguard of its public support and presentation, and (2) that painting itself is well on its way to being similarly marginalized.

It was certainly striking that in the vast logistical planning that went into the organization of the "MOMA 2000" exhibitions, no place was accorded to the birth and developments of abstract art. There were plenty of examples of abstract art in the separate little shows that constituted "MOMA 2000," but those examples were in every case presented to the public on the basis of their subject-matter, their so-called "content," and not on the basis of their abstract aesthetic. John Elderfield, one of the curators involved in the organization of "MOMA 2000," at least had the decency to acknowledge this perverse treatment of abstraction as a failure of thought, but elsewhere in the voluminous texts that accompanied "MOMA 2000" the aesthetic history of abstraction was consigned to oblivion.

At Tate Modern in London, there was also a discernible hostility to all aesthetic considerations, for painting and sculpture of every persuasion were similarly presented

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to the public on the basis of their thematic "content." And in the Tate Modern's initial blockbuster exhibition—a real horror called "Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis"—painting could scarcely be said to have been given even a marginal status. In the section devoted to New York, for example, the twentieth century was represented by work from the period 1969–1974 with the principal focus on Andy Warhol, Lynda Benglis, Vito Acconci, Adrian Piper, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Mary Miss. There were no paintings, abstract or otherwise. Even in the sections devoted to Vienna 1908–1918 and Paris 1905–1918, where paintings could not be avoided, they were presented as a kind of tribal art of interest for its social content and political imagery.

In my own thinking about this fateful shift of priorities away from the aesthetics of painting, both abstract and representational, in favor of a political, sexual, and sociological interest in art-making activities, two historical developments—one within the realm of art itself, the other in the larger arena of intellectual and cultural life—appear to have shaped the situation in which we find ourselves. In the art world, the emergence of the Minimalist movement, which has been so central in determining the fate of abstract art since the 1960s, went so far in diminishing the aesthetic scope and resources of abstraction that it may in some respects be said to have marked a terminal point in its aesthetic development. At the same time, in the larger arena of cultural life, the fallout from the 1960s counterculture left all prior distinctions between high art and pop culture more or less stripped of their authority. It was hardly a coincidence that Minimalism and Pop Art made their respective debuts on the American art scene at the very same moment. However they may have differed in other respects, they were alike insofar as each constituted a programmatic assault not only on the Abstract Expressionism of the New York School—their initial target—but also on the entire pictorial tradition of which the New York School was seen to be a culmination.

It was left to Donald Judd, the most militant of the Minimalists, to spell out exactly what was at stake in this project to sever all ties to the cultural past. About what Judd contemptuously called "the salient and most objectionable relics of European art," he was nothing if not explicit: "It suits me fine," he said in a radio interview in 1964, "if that's all down the drain." He clearly meant it, too, for what was needed, in his view, was an art that would radically occlude all connection not only with the great traditions of the distant past but also with the kind of latterday modernism that he had come to regard as the depleted remnants of a moribund culture. For Judd, art itself had become a utopian project.

There is a passage in an essay by Lionel Trilling—"Aggression and Utopia," published in 1973—that neatly defines the spirit that came to govern this utopian project and so much else in the Minimalist movement. Never mind that Trilling was writing about a Victorian utopian romance—William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. His admonitory analysis of its utopian vision applies with uncanny accuracy to the Minimalist project. This is the key passage:

> the world is an aesthetic object, to be delighted in and not speculated about or investigated; the nature and destiny of man raise no questions, being now wholly and finally manifest. . . . [I]n Morris's vision of the future, the judgment having once been made that grandiosity in art is not conformable with happiness and that Sir Christopher Wren had exemplified radical error in designing St. Paul's, the race has settled upon a style for all its artifacts that is simple and modestly elegant, and no one undertakes to surprise or shock or impress by stylistic invention.

This, in my view, is the Ground Zero from which the aesthetics of abstraction has not yet recovered.

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The art of collecting

by E. V. Thaw

When asked to say something about "collecting," the first thought that enters my mind is a negative one: it is not "accumulating." And a second negative: it is not "investing." What then, stated positively, is collecting? It is acquiring objects that have some relation to each other and putting those objects into the kind of order that reflects the collector's response to them. Each true collection achieves a personality beyond and apart from the sum of the objects. This personality is definable and has a value in itself. It is lost if the collection is dispersed or mutilated.[1]

All the above is true, I believe, of collections of baseball cards, beetles and butterflies, stamps and coins, and many other categories of collecting and ordering, but true only peripherally. It is the category of art collecting that concerns me here, and this is the category in which what I call "personality" is most apparent and, somehow, central. I include decorative arts. The fine and the decorative arts are also most vulnerable to the accusation of appearing to be mere accumulations where the ordering function is absent or minimal. This can be noted in private collections as well as museums. True collections are never only an assembly of accidents or lucky finds, although individual pieces or sections may be so characterized.

The true art collector must have some initial instinct and preference for the field chosen. But, while instinct and taste are crucial, so is scholarship. Studying books, visiting other collections, consulting experts, learning about condition and conservation, and, generally, developing experience and expertise are also crucial aspects of the intelligent collecting of art.

All of this sounds so virtuous, so boring. What about the late John Gere, a curator at the British Museum, who collected plein air oil sketches? He is reported to have rushed away to a dealer's office in London to buy a rare sketch that his fiancée Charlotte had spotted for herself.[2]

What about that late genius of collecting,

1 This essay is occasioned by two exhibitions now on view in New York. "The Thaw Collection: Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, Acquisitions Since 1994" opened at The Morgan Library on September 27, 2002 and remains on view until January 19, 2003. "Nomadic Art of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes: The Eugene V. Thaw and Other New York Collections" opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art on October 1, 2002 and remains on view until January 5, 2003. On September 10, 2002, Mr. Thaw was elected an Honorary Trustee of The Metropolitan Museum.

2 "A Brush with Nature, The Gere Collection of Landscape Oil Sketches" was on view at The Frick Collection, New York, from September 12 to November 12, 2000, and at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, England, from January 12 to March 25, 2001.

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Norton Simon, who seemed to get as much pleasure from outwitting the dealers and auctioneers as from the art itself? He would often not buy until he showed the painting to his butler, his cook, his chauffeur, or other laymen to test its "popularity quotient."

When Plato insists that the search for Beauty is allied to the pursuit of the Good, he clearly had no premonition of the art market of the last hundred years or so. The phrase "he would sell his mother to obtain that picture" has been heard in all its variations so often that the thought of collecting as a compulsion rather than as a purely rational activity certainly occurs to one. Where collecting becomes contaminated by "investing," the objects purchased for the primary purpose of sooner or later being resold at a profit, then the "personality" of the assemblage is non-existent and the sense of order among the objects is similar to the exhibitions mounted before an auction sale. Of course, good collections, with plenty of order and personality, are sometimes dispersed at auction, their catalogues, often well produced by the auction houses, serving as a similar kind of memorial to the collector's taste and skill as a museum catalogue. More often, however, an auction bearing a great collector's name is only a fragment of the whole, what remained at death or after a change of interests, or after numerous masterworks had been donated, sold, given to children, or otherwise removed from the core.

I have observed, over the years, that collectors form a kind of loose confraternity. We all tend to know one another within our geographical limits and, although we compete sometimes, we tend to support and encourage each other emotionally. We are happy when a fellow collector makes a great discovery or a great buy and have very little "schadenfreude" when he or she buys a mistake. There are many lavish apartments and houses with good paintings in New York along Park and Fifth Avenues and in the best suburbs of Dallas, Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but very few real collections as I am using the term. Someone who stops acquiring Monets or Picassos when the house is decorated is not a collector, by definition.

So is it a mania, then, that makes one continue to add, to refine, to put in order a collection of works of art? Are the dreadful Freudians right, after all, that collectors must have had unhappy childhoods? That they cling to possessions like an unloved child clinging to fuzzy toys as a substitute for maternal affection? Does the retentive habit follow through one's life because of poor toilet training?

These traits and these explanations are offered in a recent book on collecting by the well-known Freudian analyst (and collector) Dr. Werner Muensterberger. It was published by Princeton University Press,[3] so it must have passed expert readers who did not consider such ideas complete nonsense. Yet, nonsense they are, and Muensterberger's examples of so-called collectors feature Balzac, who bankrupted himself by filling his Paris "hotel particulier" with carloads of meretricious decorative junk, and the nineteenth-century book collector Sir Thomas Phillipps. He was the paradigm type of "accumulator," buying enormous quantities of books and manuscripts from catalogues of booksellers and auctions. He hardly ever saw his purchases, the unopened packages piling up in his several residences, only to be revealed after his death in a long series of book auctions from which many of todays major libraries trace some of their greatest treasures. Phillipps, however, in his behavior to his wife and family as well as to the world around him, was certifiably insane.

I am not competent to demolish the Freudian put-downs of our humanity, and I believe much of that work has by now been done by competent others. Nevertheless, as a collector myself for nearly fifty years, I can admit that some compulsion plays a role

3 *Collecting*, by Werner L. Muensterberger; Princeton University Press, 324 pages, $55.

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and that sometimes the urge is hard to control. Certainly, then, there is a psychological factor, sometimes called a "passion." But what is wrong with a passion to collect? How about the passion to breed racehorses and win the Kentucky Derby? Or for building one great yacht after another to win the America's Cup? It has been said that rather than being critical of the affluent who spend large sums to acquire works of art, one should be critical if they didn't.

Not everyone who can afford to collect likes or understands works of art. Not everyone who likes and understands them wants particularly to possess them. There are, after all, more than enough on public display in museums and commercial galleries to satisfy most people's tastes and desires for aesthetic experience. That some of us must physically possess some of these art objects has, I believe, one significant cause. By possession one is able to experience the object more intimately and more completely than even the most thoroughly attentive viewing at an exhibition. Also, concentrating on the original work over illustrations in art books, computer images, or the projected slides of university art lecturers is a kind of cultural rebuke to the trend of our times not to care about the unique impact of originals, but to look for economic, political, gender, or other issues for which reproductions are all that is needed. I used to host a session of the Museum Course at NYU's Institute of Fine Arts every year when I was dealing in art. I was continually saddened by the lack of interest in the major old master paintings I would pull out of my closets and display on a lighted easel. Some graduate students might be interested in the back of the painting to notice labels or the type of relining, but most were immobilized by such proximity to an original master painting and could only mutter some clichés about the price or the social conditions and patronage that underlay its production. No analysis or enjoyment of the painting itself. No budding art collectors there.

Of course there are economic concerns which the most passionate and serious collector needs to be aware of. Nothing concentrates the mind like the need to write a large check for an object to take home and add to an ensemble which has long proven its quality and resonance. Will the newcomer hold up in its place and under severe scrutiny? Does it fill a gap or does it refine the intelligent order of the assemblage? By all this I mean that collecting consists of many rational decisions and is an intellectual activity in spite of factors such as instinct, taste, passion, and other such concepts. We are not animals, nor are we deprived children shouting "mine, all mine" at an exhibition of art for sale, but rational beings making careful choices and carefully examining our instinctive reactions so as not to let them seize control.

Real art collectors often feel the ability to apply their talents to any field of art. The late Jacques Gelman[4] once told me that, should the supply of the kind of great modern paintings he collected dry up, he would collect Chinese ceramics with the same search for quality and the same satisfaction for his eye. I myself have collected seriously in at least three different fields, Master drawings, American Indian art, and Nomadic art of the Eurasian steppes. I have several other categories up my sleeve that could mature into collections showing order and rational choices should I live long enough.

But today the odds are stacked against the activities of the true collector of most kinds of art. National borders are rapidly closing; the United Nations is sponsoring ever more restrictive international treaties prohibiting the collecting of any art except that of one's own country. Our State Department and its compliant advisory arm, the Committee on Cultural Property, is toadying to the demands of so-called "source nations," seizing

4 Whose great collection of historic modern art, the Jacques and Natasha Gelman collection, is at the Metropolitan Museum in its own galleries.

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and returning objects or paintings that might be legally imported but are "stolen" in the eyes of nations that claim that all art belongs to the State.

Because these dramas are now taking place in the antiquities field, all art collecting has come under a cloud. The archaeologists and anthropologists who stress context want to forbid collecting because art markets, they claim, cause the illegal digging and despoliation of sites that source nations are too poor to protect (or too corrupt). No collecting, no markets, no value, i.e., no digging. QED. Of course it's not so simple, and the value that collectors and art markets create have been in most cases the only reasons that much of the world's art has survived. This has been a phenomenon since Roman times and has preserved at least something in the face of history during which gold, silver, and bronze objects were regularly melted down for state debts and cannons.

This is not the place to argue the long and complex issues of international art markets. It is enough to say that the movement of art has always been affected by the economic strength of one part of the world versus another. The Chinese, just now, are emerging as the strongest competitors for their own historic art as their economic boom continues its dramatic rise. Such are the natural and beneficial economic waves that, like free trade, should be encouraged, not stifled by nationalistic restrictions. Great and merely good art, like literature or music, is international and will only suffer and die if confined in a political straightjacket. The Elgin Marbles should stay right where they are in the British Museum.

But what to do or to say about the sadly diminished reputation of the art collector, both private ones and museums as collectors, in our peculiar times? What was once a prestigious and admired activity, thought to have public benefits for education and aesthetic pleasure, has now become a dirty word, joining the denigration of both "connoisseurship" in the study of art history, and the concept of "quality" as applied to the art of the present. These notions are lumped into the convenient and amorphous rubric of "elitist"—a term that has lost all earlier definitions and now means, very specifically, that one is against minority cultures, women's art, poor people, children, etc. If the collector is seen to spend a large sum on a Degas or a Pollock, somewhere criticism is likely to flow that the money would have been better spent on a neighborhood youth center or the battle against AIDS. What used to be seen as part of the general support for civilized values is today seen as having no value. Art collecting is seen as obsolete, with countries like England no longer financially supporting many great cultural institutions as they normally did, but instead are seeking to transfer the money needed for so-called "High Culture" to popular cultural themes which, because popular, are usually financially successful on their own. As a consequence, the British Museum, for the first time in its history, is firing expert scholarly curators (called "keepers") in order to keep the doors open.

The overwhelming majority of those who call themselves collectors collect contemporary art. Highly acclaimed contemporary art is, and always has been, the most expensive kind of art to pursue. A fine Jasper Johns can cost more than a great Monet or a pretty good Rembrandt. The number of people world-wide who collect seriously and internationally in the areas of antiquities, tribal arts ("primitive art" is no longer politically correct to say), old master paintings and drawings, and museum quality Oriental arts is minuscule in comparison with contemporary stuff. Those who do are probably a dying population in the culture wars. But possibly the tide will turn, and, as all the postmodern nonsense fades into satirical footnotes, art collecting and its adjuncts, connoisseurship and the search for quality, may once again see their reputations restored.

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Art history, Oxford style

by Michael J. Lewis

Rumors of the death of the Western canon have been greatly exaggerated, and no more so than in the field of art history. There Giotto and Michelangelo, Cézanne and Picasso soldier bravely on, holding the high ground, and they will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Paradoxically, the conservative character of art history is guaranteed by its very dispensability. The undergraduate who takes the introductory course expects, at a minimum, to get a rough inventory of the works he might one day see in Florence or in Paris. Tamper with that inventory too much, and the student is gone—no Michelangelo, no art history. As a consequence, the undergraduate has generally been spared the worst of the theoretical excesses of the new art history, at least until graduate school.

This fundamental conservatism is ratified by the principal textbooks of the discipline, above all H. W. Janson's hefty *History of Art*, the principal undergraduate textbook since 1962. Although the current sixth edition version is more unwieldy than ever, a $95.00 leviathan augmented by considerable new material on the art of Asia and Africa, the essential story remains intact. The stage is more crowded, and the principal figures are now shouldered in among a much larger cast of bit players, but they still hold pride of place. And the narrative still progresses in linear fashion, in which choice examples unfold in a dynamic evolutionary sequence.

So the history of art has been taught in the West since at least 1550, when Giorgio Vasari published his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. Perhaps the only difference is that while Vasari presented a single strand of development, that glorious cadenza from Giotto to Michelangelo, the modern academic survey presents a number of independent lines, such as Greek art, Gothic architecture, or Modernism, each with its own internal logic and evolutionary momentum.

A progressive view of art has undoubted drawbacks. The reader learns to judge works of art not on their intrinsic qualities but on the degree to which they are progressive, and learns to disdain evolutionary dead ends—such as that art historical dinosaur, the late Gothic. But the linear sequence also has its virtues, not least of which is the literary merit of generating narrative propulsion. And it has the great intellectual merit of depicting each successive artist in vigorous and intelligent competition with his contemporaries and immediate predecessors—which approximately describes the nature of the art world through much of western history. Such has been the nature of art history from Vasari to Janson. And such is the edifice that the *Oxford History of Art* seeks to topple. Introduced in 1997 by Oxford University Press and edited by Simon Mason, it proposed "a comprehensive, accessible library covering all aspects of art and architecture, East and West, from ancient civilizations to Cindy Sherman." A grand total of sixty volumes

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was envisioned, each attractively designed, generously outfitted with color illustrations, and quite affordable (mostly paperbacks selling under seventeen dollars). To date, Oxford has published twenty-five volumes, two of which I have already used in class. It is now possible to begin to take the measure of the series—or rather, alas, to plumb its depths.

In appearance and format these books are as conventional as can be. The casual reader, flipping through the 150 or so photographs, would have little inkling that the series represents a defiant challenge to "the elitist, connoisseurial approach of the past." But this becomes abundantly clear at the table of contents, which radically rejects chronology as a basis for ordering information. Instead, chapters are arranged thematically, according to such collective abstractions as nature, community, and money (in Dell Upton's *Architecture in the United States*) or gender, aesthetics, and deconstruction (in Donald Preziosi's *Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*). Here is no opportunity for "grand narrative," or indeed for any narrative at all.

There is no reason that a survey must be chronological. In many areas, particularly when dealing with archaeological material or with folk art, it makes more sense to organize material according to media or materials. But where ceaseless nervous innovation, agitated by the pressures of the market and of fashion, is the rule—as is true of most of Western art—the results are deadly. This is the case with Matthew Craske's *Art in Europe 1700–1830*, which may be taken as typical of the series.

If ever a period invited a grand narrative, it is this turbulent century. The lineage from Fragonard to Greuze to David takes us briskly through Rococo insouciance to neoclassical moralizing to revolutionary romanticism, punctuated by political and social upheavals of the most sweeping sort. Here, one might imagine, is ripe opportunity to consider "art in its social and cultural context," as the Oxford prospectus promises. Instead, we ponderously learn from Craske's introduction, these great sweeping historical categories have no purchase or meaning:

> In the first sentence of his *Romantic Art* of 1978 William Vaughn declares that: "Whatever else is said about the Romantic movement, no one can deny that it really did happen." This rather doctrinaire claim can be taken as a very considerable spur to independent thinkers to assume the role of "no one." Having assumed this role one could point out that the "romantic movement" as both a specific linguistic construct and broad concept did not exist in the period 1790–1830.

Perhaps. But if Craske has a better term to account for that common quality of sentiment and expression that is found variously in Walter Scott, Eugène Delacroix, and Caspar David Friedrich, he does not share it. Instead he takes pot shots at those who used the terms "rococo," "neoclassicism," and "romanticism" inconsistently, but then spares himself the heavy lifting of defining these terms more rigorously—or of providing substitutes. Instead, he drops the whole business altogether, organizing his text according to such broad categories as aesthetic theory and the professional identity of the artist. In the process, the undergraduate reader will have learned that there are certain historical terms for characterizing broad epochs in art, that if you use those terms you will be liable to haughty disdain, and that there is no substitute for those terms. Craske is not alone in his conspicuous hand-wringing about methodology; it is a veritable leitmotif of the series. Volume after volume begins with an apologia for having made a selection of images in the first place. The apologies have the odd effect of being both arrogant and cringing at the same time, as in, for example, Donald Preziosi's priceless introduction to writings on "The Gendered Subject" in *The Art of Art History*:

> You may also have concluded that the differentness of my own voice in each introduc-

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> tory place of observation has been designed to fend off the perception of a (continuing, consistent) "position" on my part with respect to the "subject-matters" so positioned. This represents no lack of specificity of desire on my part, of course, but is rather a performative enactment of the specificity of any engagement with the presumptions of the texts collected. It is one way of derailing any attempt to construe any position that I (as "editor") may be taking an intended value-neutral standard or orthodoxy.

One can concur with the quotation marks around "editor." Apparently Preziosi's immersion in contemporary methodology has given him an extraordinary diffidence about what art history can tell us with any certainty (the short answer: virtually nothing). His preface to his second volume in the series, *Ancient Aegean Art*, is a startlingly dispiriting statement about what his book refuses to do, or is unable to do, with no corresponding positive statement.

One advantage of chronological narrative is that events which take place at some remove are physically separate. The book itself serves to calibrate time. It makes it possible to see that the leading figures are placed in their proper relationship to one another, and to the currents of the age—or if they are present at all. In Craske's case, they are not. Indeed, so wayward and perverse is the choice of illustrations in *Art in Europe 1700–1830* that it amounts to a prejudice against good painting. While not a single work by Lawrence, Raeburn, Constable, or even Greuze is shown, Craske finds room for no fewer than a dozen by Hogarth and Thomas Rowlandson. At the same time Piranesi, who taught Europe the poetry of the ruin, is represented by a single inadequate print. This is no accident, but the inevitable result of a selection process that looks not at aesthetic merit but at the potential of a work of art to illustrate a sociological principle. And for this purpose, popular illustration is better than formal painting.

Again, for this reason, Craske unerringly chooses the more didactic and discursive illustrator over the pure painter, thus Canaletto and Bellotto rather than the more gifted Guardi (unmentioned), and the middlebrow Pietro Longhi rather than Alessandro Magnasco or Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (both unmentioned), respectively one of the great painterly artists and great draftsmen of the era. Above all, those artists whose thought was chromatic rather than anecdotal are given short shrift. Thus Turner, who extended the expressive range of oil painting as Beethoven did the piano, is represented with a minor watercolor of Waterloo. And of the glorious Fragonard there is not a single illustration—the unkindest cut of them all.

Such then is the promising new art history, the abolition of neoclassicism and romanticism, and the replacement of Greuze and Fragonard with a gallery of Nordic nobodies. One cannot say we weren't warned. After all, the series prospectus promised to "include discussions of unfamiliar works often dismissed by traditional surveys and text." But the truth is that those same "unfamiliar" artists were themselves avidly studying the works of those canonical French masters. To exchange the one for the other is to confuse cause and effect—but then again, in a non-chronological narrative, cause and effect is not the point.

A similar tendentiousness afflicts Evelyn Welch's *Art and Society in Italy 1350–1500*, which certainly does not live up to the series' vow that it would "cover all the major artists and iconic masterpieces of art history." Welch not only fails to show anything by Giovanni Bellini, she even slights that great humanist of the fifteenth century, Piero della Francesca. Even poor plodding Janson, his book crammed with the art of Oceania, finds room to proclaim that "Piero's art is the projection of a mind cultivated by mathematics and convinced that the highest beauty is found in forms that have the clarity and purity of geometric figures." But such proclamations veer close

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to the abyss of grand narrative, and of this Welch steers clear.

If anything, there is a tendency to deliberately snub the "iconic masterpieces" and to debunk their makers. Nowhere is this shown more egregiously than in Welch's treatment of Leon Battista Alberti. The author of the two major treatises of the Italian Renaissance, *Della Pittura* and *De Re Aedificatoria*, Alberti proposed that classical antiquity, properly understood and rehabilitated, should be the basis of painting and architecture. That doctrine was manifested in Alberti's own buildings, including his San Andrea in Mantua and Rucellai Palace in Florence. There he brilliantly manipulated the forms of antiquity with that lively mental freedom that is the central achievement of the Renaissance.

But what will the diligent reader learn of Alberti from Welch? This will require an adroit use of the index, as there is no capsule biography of the sort embedded in traditional surveys. Nonetheless, a cumulative picture emerges. Alberti was a polymath whose *Della Pittura* was probably not much read by artists (pages 127–128). Otherwise he is quoted on the role of devotional images (page 159), for his condemnation of tramps and beggars (page 279), his interest in the decorum of dress and behavior (page 281), and his insistence that women not enter the studies of their husbands (page 219). His buildings are alluded to but not named. The reader of the book cannot help but conclude that Alberti was a rather unattractive figure—a dilettante, social snob, and misogynist—who can presumably be safely ignored, as he was evidently not very important in the first place.

A better title for the book might be "The Social Context of Art in Italy," since that really is the subject of the book, which is as uninterested in the history of ideas as it is in works of art. But there is little conceptual rigor to the sociological or economic analysis that flickers through many of the Oxford volumes. A case in point is Dell Upton's thematic study, *Architecture in the United States*. Here for once is an author who is qualified to take the measure of his subject, a historian equally at home in the world of ideas and that of archival and field research. I turned to Upton's chapter on Money with high expectations.

It is certainly possible to imagine a splendid discussion on the role of money in architecture. For example, how is capital accumulated to make a building, and how have changes in the process of real estate speculation affected architecture? Or how has the allocation of expenses within a building budget changed? To compare a builder's estimate from 1850 and today, for example, is to notice that the relative prices of labor and materials have shifted radically. Where labor was once cheap and materials dear, it is now the other way around. Thus the building operation itself systematically shifts away from those trades (bricklaying, plastering, joinery) that once provided the small-scale forms and details of our buildings in favor of the prefabricated industrial systems in contemporary architecture. This would be architectural history, told not in the hoary language of styles and fads, but in terms of the financial foundation on which it rests.

But in Upton's chapter on Money, there is none of this. Instead of a rigorously grounded examination of the way in which finance affects building, one is treated to a rather undifferentiated parade of examples in which money played a role—anecdotes as it were. And such is the approach in each of the chapters. Apart from the first chapter—an extended and rather brilliant read of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello—each example comes in for a quick read, which is generally enough to show that a building will have a meaningful connection to Money, or to Land, or to Community. The nimble student learns by example that these qualities, with some ingenuity, can be found to reside within any building. But something that is true under all circumstances is not a truth but a truism; it says nothing.

As a rule, the Oxford volumes are deeply interested in aesthetic theory but indifferent

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to beauty. But only Upton's book evinces outright hostility to the concept as such. His extraordinary final chapter, baldly entitled "Art," suggests that all discussion of architectural aesthetics is nothing more than a cynical career strategy on the part of architects. What of the proliferation of architectural schools, the formation of professional societies, the lively debate in the popular and professional press? To Upton, this is but the "negotiation of cognitive exclusiveness," the crass attempt to wrap the profession within a protective mantle of arcane knowledge. Thus architecture is not to be viewed as an art, as one of the richest achievements of civilization itself, nor as an intellectual enterprise, but as a clever dodge for putting one over on the builder and the carpenter.

But why go on? Suffice it to say that a very few Oxford entries thrive with their thematic organization. Barry Bergdoll's *European Architecture 1750–1890* overlaps Craske's book, but it manages to get it just about right, with a judicious sense of balance. But here he insists on thoughtful sidebars which provide biographies and judicious definitions where needed. The result is a book that indeed lives up to the promise of the series, providing new scholarship as well as doing justice to those "iconic masterpieces." I have used it in the classroom with delightful results. But I have also used Graham Clarke's *The Photograph*, which prompted more student dismay than I have ever seen prompted by a textbook. And I suspect this will be the rule with the series.

Ultimately, the problem of the *Oxford History of Art* is that the books are remedial in conception, aimed at correcting the bogeyman of "traditional surveys and texts." But where are these surveys? For Oxford there seem to be an endless torrent of turgid style-bound surveys, from which women and blacks are endlessly excluded, and in which the reader is presumed to be wearing a monocle. If there are such surveys, I have not seen them. The "social and cultural context" of art objects has been a commonplace since the 1960s. If there is a danger in modern art history, it is not that the student knows too little of society or culture, but that he scarcely knows anything else.

The role of the survey author is to order information and to make sense of it. The reader must be given a clear sense of time and space, the lattice into which he can place information, and retrieve it. With such a lattice, he can take a fact—the Treaty of Westphalia, 1648, say—and relate it to other facts. He can judge if it is a central fact, or a peripheral vignette. Without such a lattice, he has but an item of trivia, an anecdote. No longer can the writer count on the student possessing such a mental lattice. In fact, since progressive colleges began abolishing their Western civilization requirements in the 1970s, many students first encounter the West as a coherent cultural artifact in an art history elective. For some it will be the only occasion when they hear about classical antiquity, medieval Christianity, or the Protestant reformation.

It should also be pointed out that these books are rather bleak to read. They can be picked up at random and read from any point, but they doggedly refuse to acquire literary momentum. And with their images out of sequence and capriciously chosen, they do not even fulfill the minimal requirements of a pictorial reference book. Perhaps the notion that art was an essential aspect of civilization—that it drew from us our highest intellectual efforts and our most profound thoughts—has been shown to be flawed. But it has the power to inspire. Not so these demoralizing volumes.

And this is the failing of the *Oxford History of Art*. Without a larger ordering principle, without a hierarchy that relates facts to one another, and to overarching systems of facts, the books deliver a bundle of vignettes, assertions, and attitudes. The Oxford Series—with a few notable exceptions—will shortly go the way of all works that are based on an ephemeral attitude, and in a few years will be as pyschologically inaccessible to us as the great drab mass of second-tier Victorian literature.

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Architecture & ideology

by Roger Kimball

"The problem of architecture as I see it . . . is the problem of all art—the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form."
—Professor Otto Silenus, in Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*

This meticulous observance of "pure styles" is a mark of failing energy in imagination; it is a mark, also, of an inadequacy in thought: of a failure to define the nature of style in general. We cling in architecture to the pedantries of humanism, because we do not grasp the bearing upon architecture of the humanist ideal.
—Geoffrey Scott, *The Architecture of Humanism*

I was delighted to learn that my presence at Yale's recent symposium about the American architect Peter Eisenman and the Luxembourg-born architect Léon Krier was to be under the aegis of my late friend Brendan Gill.[1] Brendan was a distinguished alumnus of Yale—I trust other alumni will forgive that pleonasm—and he was also widely admired as a keen, lively writer about architecture for *The New Yorker.*

Brendan was a merry soul. It is pleasing to speculate about what his reaction would have been to the news that Robert A. M Stern, the Dean of the School of Architecture, had decided not only to ask me to introduce this symposium, but also to denominate me, if but momentarily, the Brendan Gill Lecturer. I suspect that his response would have been one of amusement—spiced, perhaps, with a soupçon of anxiety.

Since I happened to be in New Haven while this exhibition of Mr. Eisenman's and Mr. Krier's work from the 1970s and 1980s was being installed, I took advantage of the coincidence to get a glimpse of the exhibition as it went up. It is one of the privileges of being a critic that one often has the opportunity to drop in as an exhibition is being mounted. There is always a certain excitement, a certain freshness, about seeing an exhibition in this state of morning dishabille, as it were. The bustle of technicians fixing labels, touching up the paint, making some late decisions about exactly how that last row of pictures should be hung is somehow more energizing than distracting. It's like a glimpse backstage at a theatrical performance, which to my mind tends rather to enhance than dissipate the magic of the performance.

I thought about Brendan as I picked my way gingerly among the ladders, drills, track-lighting, and masking tape. I wish that he could have accompanied me. He would,

1 This essay is adapted from the keynote lecture delivered at the Yale University School of Architecture on November 8, 2002 as part of the two-day symposium "Eisenman, Krier: Two Ideologies." An exhibition of the same name, focusing on Peter Eisenman's "House IV" and Léon Krier's "Atlantis Project," opened on November 4 and remains on view at the Yale School of Architecture until February 7.

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I think, have had a smile for the images on the wall and a twinkle in his eye for the symposium as a whole. Brendan liked handsome pictures, and he had a healthy appetite for incongruity. He would not have been disappointed on either score.

The welcoming image in the exhibition is a copy of one of Mr. Krier's classical fantasies. It is a sort of acropolis populated by friends and patrons besporting themselves in contemporary garb: Puvis de Chavannes with couture by Ralph Lauren, sets by Winckelmann. It would, I think, have brought Brendan up short. "Do you suppose it is meant seriously?" he might have whispered, amusement once again competing with anxiety.

Now, Brendan liked his bit of kitsch as much as the next chap, but he preferred it light and gently self-mocking. There is a mocking quality to some of the images on view in this exhibition; there is certainly a mocking quality in some of the architectural visions that the exhibition represents; but it is a mockery directed outward, toward the viewer, toward the public, not inward toward the maker. The great social theorist Phineas Taylor Barnum is alleged to have remarked that "There's a sucker born every minute." Although a proof of this proposition awaits definitive formulation, "Eisenman, Krier: Two Ideologies" deserves an honored place in the annals of corroborative incident.

Still, there are a lot of fetching images on view in this exhibition. Mr. Krier is more than an accomplished architectural draftsman: he is a brilliantly evocative artist whose classicizing fantasies are a delight to the eye and a spur to the imagination. His drawings are something more—something other, at any rate—than attractive building instructions or architectural elevations. They are tranquil portraits of—I was going to say of a vanished world, but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are reconstructions of a world that never quite existed, indeed that never could exist, but whose beauty, whose seductiveness, lies precisely in that mixture of impossibility and exquisite delineation.

Mr. Eisenman of course does not go in much for seducing his viewers—not, anyway, with promises of any normal gratification. But considered simply as drawings—that is, considered apart from any alleged connection with the art of architecture—the plans and sketches for the unbuilt "House IV" possess their own beauty and fascination. It is naturally a very different sort of fascination from that exerted by Mr. Krier's drawings. They are cooler, less sumptuous, less immediately welcoming than Mr. Krier's classical essays. They bear the stamp not of an artist's hand but of a puzzle-maker's ingenuity, and they do this by design. Mr. Krier elaborates a way of life; Mr. Eisenman analyzes—or seems to analyze—a geometry. His drawings are fiercely, indeed ostentatiously, cerebral. It is, from one point of view, good fun and, it should be acknowledged, Mr. Eisenman expresses his vision with considerable elegance. A cube is presented; it is bisected; it is hollowed out; the cube is rotated; inverted; elaborated and transformed by a series of algorithms. This prodigy Mr. Eisenman tells us is a house. Some people believe him. He says "House IV" is "an attempt to alienate the individual from the known way in which he perceives and understands his environment." Rich Canadians stand in awe and shovel money his way. Universities appoint him to the faculty. Learned seminars are devoted to dissecting his importance. How it would have gratified Mr. Barnum.

Alice Roosevelt Longworth famously said that "If you can't say something good about someone, sit right here by me." I confess that I have always harbored a sneaking fondness for Alice. But by and large Brendan belonged to the opposite school. He tended to look on the bright side. He much preferred liking things to disliking them. I have no doubt that he would have found a good deal to like in "Eisenman, Krier: Two Ideologies." In purely visual terms there is a good deal to like. But I suspect that, like me, he would have greeted the proposition

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that this was an exhibition whose chief concern was with architecture with a certain scepticism.

Why the scepticism? I believe that the subtitle of this symposium—"Two Ideologies"—may have a useful clue to at least part of the answer. It is, I think, a spectacularly apt subtitle. For with these two architects we really are dealing not simply with radically different approaches to architecture but with two opposing ideologies.

The literature accompanying this symposium suggests that the planners were interested chiefly in exploring that opposition—exploring, that is to say, the discontinuities that define Mr. Eisenman's and Mr. Krier's relationship to the tradition of modernism and to each other. I will have something to say about that in due course. First I invite you to ponder what it might mean to say that an architect espouses an *ideology.*

Of course architects, like lesser mortals, might espouse or exhibit an ideology in their capacity as individual political agents. But what does it mean to say that an architect, considered in his capacity as an architect, espouses an ideology? Think about it: Did Brunelleschi have an ideology? Did Alberti? Did Stanford White? They certainly had opinions about what made good architecture: they embraced some things and disparaged others. But having an opinion is not the same thing as espousing an architectural ideology.

Modernism was notoriously an architecture that never left home without a manifesto, and doubtless some practitioners of modernist architecture would count as ideological architects. Or one might point to Albert Speer whose grandiose neo-classicism was self-consciously put in the service of an ideology. It is perhaps significant in this context that Mr. Krier has had some admiring things to say about Speer's architecture—not, I hasten to add, because of its association with the Nazis but because of its effort to revivify, in hypertrophied form, a certain version of neo-classicism.

But what, to step back for a moment, *is* an ideology? We live at a time when we are regularly assured that "everything is political," that everyone and everything has an ideology, that no point of view is "innocent," that "truth" is merely an honorific conferred by power, and so forth. But let's leave that self-contradictory, mind-numbing lit.-crit.-shtick to one side. It doesn't bring us any closer to understanding the title "Eisenman, Krier: Two Ideologies."

The word *idéologie* seems to have been coined by the French nobleman Destutt de Tracy in 1796. Destutt, a follower of the materialist philosopher Condillac, had set out to describe the process by which ideas came to consciousness. He was a sort of proto-sociologist. But although the word, like so many dubious intellectual imports, is of French origin, it did not acquire its full quota of owlishness until it was adopted and groomed by the Germans. Marx and Engels did more than anyone to popularize the term. It was while at school with the Marxists that the word "ideology" turned nasty and developed teeth. Characteristically, the word acquired a dual meaning: overtly, it was just a fancy term for describing someone's world view, but by insinuation it also cast a negative penumbra, a suggestion of rigidity or "false-consciousness," as the Marxists say. More and more, "an ideology" was understood to describe an unfortunate piece of mental—and even moral—baggage that one's opponents labored under but which did not much bother right-thinking—by which I mean Left-leaning—souls.

The word "ideology" has never quite lost its Marxist accent; it continues to carry with it the hint of subterranean forces at work—forces that only the initiated are in a position to discern and emancipate themselves from. Indeed, that aura of impermeable knowingness is an important reason that "ideology" is such a popular word in the academy. Still, continual use has smoothed some of its rough edges. One can thus have a title like "Eisenman/Krier: Two Ideologies" without people thinking you are being rude.

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In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt observes that an ideology differs from a simple opinion in that an ideology claims to possess "the key to history" or "intimate knowledge" of "hidden universal laws." Dilute this a bit further and you wind up with ideology in the sense we have it here: "Eisenman/Krier: Two Ideologies"—that is, two efforts to recast architecture on the basis of a specialized program or agenda that takes its cue as much from extra-architectural considerations as from architectural ones.

What is the nature of those programs or agendas? In the case of Mr. Eisenman, I believe, it revolves largely around an ambition to uncover a hitherto concealed "essence" of architecture. In the case of Mr. Krier—at least in his work during the years that this symposium focuses on—the ideology revolves around an attempt to redefine architecture as a sort of classicizing mythopoesis or mythmaking.

Let's start with Mr. Eisenman. "House IV" is one of six similarly abstract houses that he designed in the 1960s and 1970s. The fact that they are known only by Roman numerals adds to their forbidding aura. A book called *Houses of Cards*, published in the late 1980s, is devoted to these works. In an essay he published in this volume, Mr. Eisenman writes that "the essence of the act of architecture is the dislocation of an ever-reconstituting metaphysic of architecture."

In case that was unclear, Mr. Eisenman goes on to explain that the designs for the six houses were all "governed by the intent to define the act of architecture as the dislocation of consequent reconstitution of an ever-accruing metaphysic of architecture."

At this stage of his career, anyway, Mr. Eisenman was very fond of the word "metaphysic." In the course of his essay, readers are introduced not only to the "metaphysic of architecture" but also to the "metaphysic of the center," the "metaphysic of the house," even the "metaphysic of dining."

It would, I think, be a mistake to regard such formidable phrases as extraneous verbal curlicues. The point is that experience of Peter Eisenman's architecture is partly a *rhetorical* experience. Architecture is not itself a verbal medium, as Mr. Eisenman sometimes pretends, but his own architectural efforts are incomplete without the accompanying text. When we encounter a stairway that leads nowhere, as we do at the Wexner Arts Center in Columbus, Ohio, we need his help to understand that we are being given a lesson in linguistic futility. Otherwise we might foolishly conclude that it was just a stairway that led nowhere and wonder about the sanity of the chap who paid the architect's bill.

Mr. Eisenman was once a recherché taste. But he has, in recent years, become something of a celebrity, and so his little lessons have become quite familiar. For the benefit of those who have not experienced his act, however, I feel I should provide at least one full-fledged example. Regarding the "metaphysic of dining," Mr. Eisenman tells us that "House III" and "House IV" explore

> an alternative process of making occupiable form, . . . a process specifically developed to operate as freely as possible from functional considerations. From a traditional point of view, several columns "intrude on" and "disrupt" the living and dining areas as a result of this process. . . . Nonetheless, these dislocations . . . have, according to the occupants of the house, changed the dining experience in a real and, more importantly, unpredictable fashion.

Being of a charitable disposition, I do not propose to analyze this passage. Instead, I present it as an artwork in its own right, something that is better admired for its autonomous beauty than picked over for its meaning. Such passages are best regarded as rhetorical adjuncts of Mr. Eisenman's drawings and buildings: frames without whose support his work could not even appear to us *as* architecture. Still, it does seem worth noting that although the occupants of Mr.

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Eisenman's houses may have found that his provocatively placed columns have *changed*—even changed "unpredictably"—their experience of living and dining, Mr. Eisenman does not say that their experience was made any more *pleasant*. Far from it. One of the main goals of Mr. Eisenman's architecture is to subvert anything so bourgeois as comfort or intelligibility. As he puts it, his houses

> attempt to have little to do with the traditional and existing metaphysic of the house, the physical and psychological gratification associated with the traditional form of the house, . . . in order to initiate a search for those possibilities of dwelling that may have been repressed by that metaphysic.

With respect to leaving behind "physical and psychological gratification," I think we can judge Mr. Eisenman's houses an unqualified success. As for "dwelling"—well, the word has a gratifying Heideggerian ring to it. But what about the "repressed possibilities" of dwelling? Could it be that there are some things that *should* be repressed? Might it be the case that, if there are such things as repressed possibilities of dwelling, it is to our benefit that they *stay* repressed? I suppose it could be said that Mr. Eisenman exposed one repressed possibility of dwelling when he left a few holes in the second story floor of one of his houses. In that case, one repressed possibility was a broken leg or a broken neck, and the occupants of the house, as we read in a recent article about Mr. Eisenman in *The New York Times*, quickly saw to it that this "possibility of dwelling" was firmly re-repressed through the expediency of some metal grates fitted over the holes.

Let us turn now to Mr. Krier. At first blush, he seems to present a kinder, gentler face to the world than Mr. Eisenman. At least, it is a less cerebral face. Mr. Krier's stairways lead somewhere, his floors are solid, his façades have the pleasing aspect of old friends. He offers a Masterpiece-Theatre sort of coziness: stately homes, lots of pillars and classical cornices, and one assumes that the servant problem is well under control. If Peter Eisenman is engaged in a search for the essence of architecture, Mr. Krier is engaged in a search for its Arcady, a dreamy version of its idealized form.

Although the portion of the Yale exhibition devoted to Mr. Krier's work is centered on The Atlantis Project, an unbuilt, classically decorated retreat for artists and intellectuals, it includes a wide range of drawings by Mr. Krier. Most pertain to unbuilt projects. Of course, many visionary architects have specialized in unbuilt projects: one thinks of Ledoux, Boulée, Piranesi, and others. Furnishing the imagination with possibilities—even, if I may so put it, *impossible* possibilities—has been a fertile source of architectural activity since the Tower of Babel—or perhaps even the bowers populating the Garden of Eden. Still, Mr. Krier embraces the unbuilt with a special passion.

A common thread running through many of his projects is rejection: rejection not only of modernist architecture but of modern reality. It's a small-is-beautiful, natural materials, brown-rice, and no-curtain-wall sort of philosophy—attractive to elites who can afford to dream those dreams and why not? Some twenty years ago, Mr. Krier famously summed up this ethic of rejection when he declared: "A responsible architect cannot possibly build today. . . . Building can only mean a greater or smaller degree of collaboration in a civilized society's process of self-destruction." Mr. Krier has apparently repudiated that statement. Nevertheless, it underscores a permanent temptation to which his approach to architecture is susceptible. Nor was that statement a solitary aberration. "I can only make Architecture," he said in another manifesto-like statement from the 1970s, "because I do not build. I do not build because I am an Architect."

With those declarations in mind, it is interesting to consider the developments that Mr. Krier collaborated on in Seaside, Florida, and Poundbury, England: do such

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New Urbanist experiments count as upper-case-A Architecture, lower-case-a architecture, or something else entirely? And what about Mr. Krier? Was he an upper-case- or lower-case-a architect while working on those projects? Maybe he wasn't an architect at all, but something else entirely? And here's a further worry: if only those who do not build can make Architecture, what about those who *have built*? Can they go back to being upper-case-A Architects after a certain period of abstinence? Or is being an upper-case-A Architect like virginity: a quality that, once lost, is gone forever?

I do not pretend to know the answers to these questions. But I raise them because I think they point to an element in Léon Krier's work that has not perhaps been sufficiently noticed. Mr. Krier has often been described as an historicist; he is that. But he is an historicist with a powerful commitment to purity, to an idealism that is moral as much as architectural. Throughout Mr. Krier's work there is a conscious effort to evoke a more humanized future by re-imagining the past. Mr. Krier dislikes the word "utopian." But there is a reason that one finds it cropping up so often in discussions of his work. In the face of an unsatisfactory reality—a reality populated by ugly buildings, too many people, and pollution: in other words, *our* reality—he composes highly personal versions of tradition that seek more to liberate the imagination than to describe a definite task. One attractive side of this vision is to be found in all those pretty pictures of classically faced buildings. I have not myself been to Seaside or Poundbury, but I am willing to believe that those boutique showpieces are plenty mignon, too.

But in fact those developments represent Mr. Krier in a conciliatory, compromising mood. And according to some reports, he was not at all happy with the results at Poundbury: too many concessions to vulgarity. In any event, more typical—more typical of the work highlighted by this symposium, anyway—are fantasies like The Atlantis Project or his plan to scratch Washington, D.C. and turn it into four Georgetown-sized villages in which pedestrian traffic would be moderated by such expedients as flooding the Washington Mall.

If there seems to be a touch of megalomania about such projects, well, Mr. Krier once spoke of facing up to "the colossal and almost inhuman task of *global ecological reconstruction*." Around the same time, he also remarked that the criterion for his work is contained in a question: "If I had to design the whole world, what would I do?" This was a contingency that Mr. Krier, only half-jokingly, described as "not improbable."

I have rehearsed what I take to be certain central aspects of Mr. Eisenman's ideology and Mr. Krier's ideology in order to delineate the basic shape or thrust of their architectural vision. I have left a lot out of account. For example, there are other aspects to Mr. Eisenman's activity besides the search for the essence of architecture. A sceptical observer, noting such things as the holes in the floors of his house, the small windows at ankle level in offices he designed, the stairways that go nowhere, the plans he offers for Ground Zero that include offices buildings that look like half-squashed paper bags, might wonder whether Mr. Eisenman was really in earnest.

Years ago, Philip Johnson extolled postmodernism for having insinuated "the giggle" into architecture. Is it possible that Mr. Eisenman—who after all is a late beneficiary of Philip Johnson's activities as an architectural impresario—is it possible that he, too, is a giggle-making postmodernist? Only, having found the all slots for cheerful historical pastiche occupied, he took the next best opening and specialized in angry looking send-ups of Corbusier and Terragni? Is Mr. Eisenman, too, in the business of purveying architectural spoofs? Perhaps, like other sensible people, he knows deep down that Jacques Derrida is a French fog-making-machine whose opinions about language and architecture are no less risible than they are mystifying? I mention it as a possibility worth considering.

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Mr. Krier is a bit harder to get in focus. Having started his professional life as a disciple of James Stirling, he seems to have vacillated between the role of architectural gadfly or prophet—"Repent! The end of the curtain wall is nigh!"—and the role of pragmatic urban planner who is trying to get the Prince of Wales's business done.

It was one of the assumptions of the Yale symposium that in the 1970s and 1980s Mr. Eisenman and Mr. Krier were both, in their disparate ways, reacting against modernism. Maybe they were. But I am not sure how illuminating that observation is. I mean, at least since Robert Venturi inverted Mies van der Rohe and proclaimed the gospel of "Less is a bore," elite architects have been hopping onto the anti-modernist bandwagon faster than you can say Colin Rowe. And some of them have done hugely attractive work.

But Mr. Eisenman and Mr. Krier stand out or stand apart from most anti-modernist architects, and so I am not sure how instructive it would be to explore their "dissimilar perceptions of history," as the program for the Yale symposium invited us to do.

How else can we understand their activity? One possibly fruitful parallel that occurred to me comes from the world of ethology, of animal behavior. Readers of Konrad Lorenz's fascinating books on the subject will remember his discussion of what he calls a "vacuum activity." A vacuum activity is instinctual behavior that occurs when an animal, deprived of its normal surroundings and objects, nevertheless "goes through the motions" of some activity typical of its species. Lorenz provides several examples from the bird kingdom. Many city dwellers who own dogs will have witnessed another example. Long deprived of bones and dirt, a city-living dog will pretend to bury a nonexistent bone in nonexistent dirt in the corner of a room. Burying bones is instinctive behavior for dogs, and a boneless, dirt-less life is just not to be borne. After a certain period of time sans bones and sans dirt, this behavior "discharges" itself, in Lorenz's term, and we find Fido pawing earnestly at the carpet in the corner living room.

I wonder whether the intriguing concept of a vacuum activity sheds some light on the relevant work of Mr. Eisenman and Mr. Krier. After all, much of what we are presented with in this exhibition is unbuilt—surely a frustrating contingency for men whose profession is building things. Just as a dog "buries" a nonexistent "bone," so Mr. Eisenman "designs" a "house" and Mr. Krier "plans" a fantasy-island hideaway.

I am sorry that we cannot engage Konrad Lorenz as a consultant in this case. I suspect he might discover some useful extensions to his idea of a vacuum activity. Is there, for example, such a thing as a *half-vacuum activity*—just a bit of air hissing in—in which, for example, a dog has a bone but no dirt, or an architect builds a house that turns out to be uninhabitable? I do not know. It is a question that demands more research, and probably a government grant. I cannot help thinking that the idea of the vacuum activity may be illuminating for architectural ideologies in which futility is budgeted in as either a basic design element or as a necessary adjunct of its impracticality.

The issue of futility brings me—a bit late admittedly—to my own title. I've settled here on "Architecture & Ideology." Originally, though, I had something more baroque. When I accepted Dean Stern's invitation to participate in the Yale symposium, he instantly asked for a title for my remarks. After a bit of cogitation, I wrote back and offered "Is There Architecture After Modernism?" I thought that might be appropriate for a discussion of work that is not only self-consciously anti-modernist but that also raises the question of the future of architecture, in one instance by subverting traditional architectural practice, in the other by fetishizing it. As an afterthought, I told Dean Stern that I'd considered proposing, in deference to Mr. Eisenman, something like—please note the parentheses—"(Re)positioning Architecture: (Post)mod-

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ernism, (Re)presentation, and the Discourses of (Dis)play." Dean Stern replied that he favored the longer title—it was, he suggested, "more provocative." I saw his point. "Is There Architecture After Modernism?" is *moderately* provocative because it raises the possibility that there isn't any architecture after modernism, which is clearly absurd. But the longer title has the advantage of total unintelligibility, which I know is in some circles a powerful recommendation.

Still, that original title was not merely flippant. The first bit poses what I think is a serious question. My answer to the question is "No, there isn't architecture after modernism—if by 'modernism' we understand not a certain denuded style of building but rather the social, economic, and political givens of contemporary life." Various English statesmen, from Gladstone to Sir William Harcourt, have been credited with the observation that "We are all socialists now." Alas, you might say—well, *I* would say "alas." But there it is. That is simply a statement of how things are. You might lament it but you cannot change it.

Similarly, there is an important sense in which we are all modernists now, Mr. Krier as much as Gordon Bunshaft. It doesn't matter whether you favor curtain walls or Corinthian columns, jeweled concrete or cedar shakes. The issue is not modernism or anti-modernism but good architecture versus bad architecture. If the architecture we have been accustomed to calling modernist errs in the direction of severity and hyper-rationalism, much of the architecture that has arisen to challenge it has erred in the direction of silliness, grim or fatuous as the case may be.

Which is worse? Stock in the modernist enterprise has been unnaturally depressed for some time now, and so it is worth reminding ourselves that there are plenty of great modernist success stories—the Yale Art Gallery by Louis Kahn, for example, or the Yale Center for British Art, its younger cousin across the street.

I believe that if we are to get a fruitful perspective on the opposition named in the title "Eisenman/Krier: Two Ideologies," we need to put that opposition in a wider context. One way of doing that allows me to introduce the hero of this lecture, the English architect and architectural historian Geoffrey Scott. Most people interested in architecture will know of Scott. He is the author of a deservedly famous book. *The Architecture of Humanism* was first published in 1914 and instantly attained the status of a classic. I bring up *The Architecture of Humanism* because, although it is in one sense well known, its fundamental messages seem to have been forgotten. It is the old story of familiarity breeding, if not contempt, exactly, then at least neglect.

It might seem odd to introduce Geoffrey Scott into a discussion of work by Peter Eisenman and Léon Krier. After all, the ostensible subject of *The Architecture of Humanism* is Renaissance architecture. But Scott's subtitle—"A Study in the History of Taste"—points to the book's larger purview. Although its subject is Renaissance architecture, its pertinence extends to the practice and appreciation of architecture generally.

Scott has two sets of lessons for us. The first revolves around his distillation of Vitruvius's principles of architecture. Vitruvius had a clutch of seven or eight; Scott, quoting the Renaissance poet Henry Wotton, boils them down to three: Commodity, Firmness, and Delight—or as we might put it, comfort and serviceability, craftsmanship and solidity, and beauty. These are the principles that must be observed in order to achieve what Wotton called "well-building."

Scott's second set of lessons revolves around the series of "fallacies" he enumerates. Especially important in this context are the Romantic Fallacy, whose most typical form, Scott tells us, is "the cult of the extinct," and the fallacies detailed in a chapter called "The Academic Tradition." Scott was himself an apostle of traditional architectural order. But he noted that, although order is a good, it is not by itself

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sufficient for good architecture. "Many of the ugliest patterns and most joyless buildings," he wrote, "possess order in a high degree; they exhibit fixed and evident ratios of design." But because they lack the animating leaven of taste, they fail.

What is the gravamen of taste? In a word, it is the body. Again and again Scott came back to the importance of the human body as the indispensable measure in architecture. The needs and dispositions of the human spirit incarnate—which means both a body in space and a body registering, contemplating space—provide the measure of that bedrock architectural value, the appropriate.

Scott speaks partly as an historian of architecture, partly as a custodian of the humanist values that were articulated with luxurious richness in Renaissance architecture. Which is why the lasting value of his book is not as an antiquarian relic but as an ever contemporary inspiration. The humanist values for which Scott enlists architecture are as pertinent today as they were in 1914—or, for that matter, 1419. All of us have heard trendy architects and their apologists natter on about Michel Foucault, the advent of the "post-human," and the impossibility of coherence or stability. But that is the twittering of sterility and exhaustion. As Scott noted,

> space affects us and can control our spirit. . . . The architect models in space as a sculptor in clay. He designs his space as a work of art; that is, he attempt through its means to excite a certain mood in those who enter it.

That is as true for us as it was for Brunelleschi or Alberti. And like them, we too possess what Scott calls the "the humanist instinct," which "looks in the world for physical conditions that are related to our own, for movements which are like those we enjoy, for resistances that resemble those that can support us, for a setting where we should be neither lost nor thwarted."

Catering to that "humanist instinct" in the medium of space is the vocation of architecture. There is an aesthetic component to this project: a component satisfied in the pleasing arrangement of masses, lines, shadows, and spaces. But the essential neediness and incompleteness of the human condition guarantees that architecture can never be judged by aesthetic criteria alone. "Architecture," as Scott put it, "is subservient to the general uses of mankind." We approach architecture with what Scott, echoing the famous Kantian formula, calls a "disinterested desire for beauty," but this desire is tethered by continual reference to the quotidian inventory of physical, psychological, and social imperatives.

If we compare Scott's humanism with the ideologies of Mr. Eisenman and Mr. Krier, we may distill several principles or, if that seems too grand a term, several admonitions. One is what I like to refer to as the Amis principle, after the British novelist Kingsley Amis. It reads: "Nice things are nicer than nasty ones." A simple principle, that—but consider how often it has been forgotten or indeed deliberately sabotaged by people who believe that notoriety can successfully substitute for genuine artistic accomplishment.

This leads naturally to my second admonition, which I take from Alberti: "Never let greed for glory," Alberti says at the end of Book 9 of *On Architecture*, "impel you to embark rashly on anything that is unusual or without precedent." That is a sentiment that might profitably be chiseled into the lintel over the entrance of Paul Rudolf's Art and Architecture Building at Yale.

The third admonition concerns what we might call the "pudding test": architecture must be not only looked at but lived with, indeed lived in, and so what works marvelously on paper may fail utterly on the street. The proof of architecture is concrete, not abstract. Seductive theories do not necessarily produce gratifying buildings.

The fourth admonition concerns what we might call novelty architecture. When someone erects a hot dog stand in the shape of a giant hot dog, the result may be in bad taste—maybe comic bad taste—but no great

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harm is done. The problem is that more and more architecture is coming to resemble novelty architecture. I don't mean that architects are slavishly mimetic. But novelty architecture comes in several varieties. Is a building that allegedly illustrates linguistic vertigo any less preposterous than the hot dog stand? How about something that could have come from the set for *Ben Hur*? Novelty architecture has a place; even Geoffrey Scott would admit that, I think. Only we need to keep it in its place: roadside refectories, amusement parks, universities, and other retreats from the serious business of life.

The last admonition I will mention is perhaps the most important. It concerns the question of essence, the ambition to exhibit or explore "the essence of architecture"—as if a house stripped bare somehow revealed the inner reality of a house. It is one of the virtues of the humanist instinct to recognize that the human world is—*essentially* is—something more than a distillation of essences. It is, on the contrary, a world of appearances: of how things look and comport themselves. This is something that our culture, and our architecture, has largely lost sight of, to our very great diminishment. The philosopher Roger Scruton has dilated on this point in his writings about architecture. "There is," Mr. Scruton writes, "no greater error in the study of human things than to believe that the search for what is essential must lead us to what is hidden." Mr. Scruton is hardly an aesthete: indeed, he follows Ruskin in insisting that art and culture are "not detachable, in the last analysis, from piety." But part of that piety is acknowledging our deep submission to the superficial, to the realm of appearance. This is the profound wisdom contained in Oscar Wilde's apparently flippant remark that a only very shallow person does not judge by appearances.

There is a large retrospective, even autumnal, ingredient in the current celebration of work by Peter Eisenman and Léon Krier. We are invited to look back a couple of decades or more to explore the work of two energetic architects whose words and whose work helped set the agenda for important aspects of contemporary architectural theory and practice. It is, in all senses of the word, heady stuff, full of breathtaking ideas. Are they, for all that, *good* ideas? Well, I will leave you all to answer that question—or to leave it unanswered if that course seems more expedient. Leaving it unanswered, I suspect, is what Brendan Gill would have done, if for no other reason than that he wanted to keep the fun of architecture going as long as possible. Fun is nice. I like fun. But fun remains most fun when it keeps to its appropriate place. The ambition to transform all of life into a playground is a prescription for the ruin of fun. Brendan knew this, too, fortunately. I am convinced that he would have approved of my concluding quotation, from the nineteenth-century American historian William Hickling Prescott. "The surest test of the civilization of a people," Prescott wrote, ". . . is to be found in their architecture, which presents so noble a field for the display of the grand and the beautiful; and which, at the same time, is so intimately connected with the essential comforts of life." It's a lot to live up to. But the alternative is having a lot to live down.

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Bonnard's "butterflies"

by James Panero

A glamorization of modern art as revolutionary runs the risks, first, of neglecting what modern art may share with the past and, second, of promoting the myth of alienation from the past as an explanation of modernist fragmentation and destabilized order.
—John Elderfield, "Seeing Bonnard," 1998

When Julius Meier-Graefe reviewed Pierre Bonnard's 1933 installation at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, he remarked, "I should never have guessed that this singer of radiant hymns, this idyllic painter and sole transmitter of the lyricism of Renoir, could produce quite this type of work." He concluded:

> One could wish that some ambitious friend of the master would undertake a more extensive celebration, selecting with intelligent taste works of all periods based on thematic categories in order to reveal Bonnard [1867–1947] in his full stature. Not only the small circle of devotees, but the entire art world, insofar as it is possessed of eyes, would realize that France has in Bonnard her most distinguished, not to say her greatest, painter.

I am not surprised that Bonnard's detractors, as I write this review, have chosen to ignore the shimmering new survey of Bonnard's work now at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.[1] Not only is this a matter of self-preservation, but it also demonstrates to what extent Washington has been ignored historically within the intellectual circles of New York, its cultural institutions, and its academic support-network. The intelligentsia's long indifference towards Bonnard, the intensely private French painter whose exquisitely beautiful works have been in the Phillips's holdings for three-quarters of a century, has become embarrassing. This painter, once labeled insufficiently revolutionary, has smoldered like a subterranean coal fire, shooting out ever more brilliant arcs of light through time.

Starting in 1925, the Washington collector Duncan Phillips, along with his wife Marjorie Phillips, began to serve as the "ambitious friend of the master." Linda Nochlin, the Lila Acheson Wallace professor of modern art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, recently called Bonnard's late bathers "exquisite rot." But Phillips, with the eye of a connoisseur, recognized what an expert on "exquisite rot" would not. "What [Bonnard] has done," he once stated, "is to carry his observations of the evanescent, especially of the movements and comminglements of color in

1 "Pierre Bonnard: Early and Late" opened at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. on September 22, 2002, and remains on view until January 19, 2003. The exhibition will also be seen at the Denver Art Museum, Colorado (March 1–May 25, 2003). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Elizabeth Hutton Turner, has been published by Philip Wilson Publishers in collaboration with The Phillips Collection (256 pages, $45).

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light and shade, to hitherto undreamed subtleties of suggestion."

Phillips went on to assemble the largest Bonnard collection in the United States: seventeen oil paintings, five drawings, and nine prints. He also established an institutional legacy at the Phillips Collection that sought to fortify Bonnard's sumptuous, color-rich legacy. Upon seeing the Bonnard collection at the Phillips Memorial Gallery, as it was then known, Henri Matisse famously remarked "Bonnard is the greatest [painter] among us." Bonnard's influence crept into the work of such American painters as Mark Rothko (through color) and Larry Rivers (through figuration), as well as the artists of the 1960s Washington color-field school.

The current Bonnard exhibition at the Phillips is not the first, nor will it be the last, devoted to the work of this master painter. But with 130 works it is the finest show on Bonnard I have seen. Positioned in the domestic interiors of the Phillips Collection, it is more intimate than the massive Bonnard retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art four years ago, more appealing than the dingy "Beyond the Easel" show at the Metropolitan last year.

The exhibition's curator Elizabeth Hutton Turner has labeled this show "Early and Late," but I was pleased to see the title taken more as suggestion than strict curatorial program in her hanging (the catalogue follows a standard chronological arrangement). Mid-career masterpieces like the white-hot *White Interior* (1932) greet the viewer upon arrival. A radiator, a tea kettle, a startled cat dissolve into dabs of white and yellow pigment. A halo of gold and crimson crackles from the head of the painter's subject, bent over or kneeling on the floor. A fiery sky peeks in over the Mediterranean Sea and above a coastal town, through a cluster of frondescent trees, through a window and its windowpane, shimmering in reflection.

For Bonnard, the ideas of early and late, painterly progress and refinement, have less to do with a crystallization or narrowing of style than with the fecundity of color and space. Within the warren of domestic interiors that make up this wing of the Phillips Collection, Bonnard's work takes on new resonance. The arabesque checkers of *Woman with Dog* (1891) swirl out into the explosion of greenery in *The Open Window* (1921) and in the rich patterns of *Young Women in the Garden (Renée Monchaty and Marthe Bonnard)* (c. 1921–1923, 1945–1946). A final room of Bonnard's bathers, reached by a set of narrow stairways and halls, opens as an explosion of color and experimentation. The bathtubs and tile floors of *The Large Bath, Nude* (1937–1939) and *Nude in Bathtub* (1941–1946) tip out and bend into the viewer's space, a sensation that has less to do with movement within the painted surface than of the painted surface flexing and revealing its contents for us to see. "I hope my paintings will endure without craquelure," Bonnard once said. "I should like to present myself to the young painters of the year 2000 with the wings of a butterfly." His work today appears alive and new. And can the metaphor be extended? In the undulating bathtubs of his bathing series, might we also see the chrysalides of the metamorphosis of Bonnard's artistic reputation, a reevaluation of the artist that, after a hundred years, is still in flux?

Few artists from the first half of the twentieth century, in fact, have created such a stir in the second as Pierre Bonnard. His reversal of fortune from obscurity and critical disdain to the ranks of one of France's great masters in the eyes of some and an artist with undeniable mass appeal speaks to the strength and longevity of his work. It also points to a slow evolution in the history of taste, a shift in cultural priorities that only now may be coming to light.

Bonnard, as artistic personage, has had much going against him. He ignored the allures of primitivism and turned to the old masters and antiquity. Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism passed him by without notice, as did two world wars, the Russian revolution, and abstraction. In New York he lacked the

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early institutional advocacy enjoyed by Kandinsky (Guggenheim) and Picasso/Matisse (Museum of Modern Art). Clement Greenberg once remarked that Bonnard "smells permanently of the fashions of 1900–14, expressing as it does the desire of the French middle classes to make history stop and stand still at 1912." In heady days of anxiety and tough-mindedness, few would admit to liking so beautiful a painter.

A son of the grande bourgeoisie, Bonnard was educated at the lycées and went on to study law in Paris, painting in his spare time. In Paul Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Edouard Vuillard (all graduates of the Lycée Condorcet) he found artistic compatriots. The summer after Bonnard finished his law degree, in 1888, they formed the Nabis, from the Hebrew word for "prophets." The group dedicated themselves to aesthetic experimentation, Japonisme, and working beyond the easel towards domestic decoration, poster art, and illustration. Bonnard painted screens and drew book illustrations. The Nabis were fundamentally uninterested in politics.

Among the aesthetic influences on Bonnard's later work were the color combinations of Paul Gauguin and the color patterns imposed through the constraints of lithography. Bonnard had experimented with both from his time in the Nabis. He disdained ideologies. "His system consists of having no system" wrote Denis, "he easily escapes analysis." Thadée Natanson, one of his first biographers, noted Bonnard's reluctance around the theories of even friends like Denis and Sérusier. If Gauguin gave lip service to radical ideology and middle-class self-loathing, Bonnard exhibited no such political commitments. In both his extracurricular activities and the growing exuberance, color, and sensuality of his paintings, such as the unrestrained "Riviera" (1923), he confounded the history of modernism with radical unradicalism.

Believing that the School of Paris had not run its course, Bonnard took up some of the language of color and light of the impressionists soon after the turn of the century. His program of painterly inquiry delivered him from the Japonisme, lithography, and the "beyond the easel" strictures of the Nabis in the 1890s to the fluid colorist work of the rest of his career. Emboldened by his early work in decoration, he undertook a pragmatic investigation of paint and surface. "Painting," he declared, "must above all be decorative." As Denis famously said a year earlier: "Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a naked woman, or some sort of narrative, is basically a flat surface covered with paints put together in a certain order."

In 1911 Bonnard purchased a IICV Renault convertible, which he had painted a pale yellow. He enjoyed motoring on Highway 7 between Paris and the French Riviera, staying in hotels, and working from memory in his rooms by artificial light, often at night. With his future wife Marthe, in 1926, he settled in a villa at Le Cannet, a hillside village overlooking Cannes, which in 1931 became his permanent home and the site of his late, and most complex, work. Here, he imagined a youthful Marthe in her toilette and painted his iconic series of aqueous bathing portraits. He constructed colorfast specters of the Côte d'Azur countryside out of the view from his window (*Studio with Mimosas* [1939–1946]). His itinerant movement through the geography of France, through the memory of his own life, and through the artistic past in the work of the second two-thirds of his life has called to mind, for some critics, the *luxe, calme, et volupté* of Gauguin, the dream mythologies of Claude Debussy, and the sense-memories of Marcel Proust.

At Le Cannet, through the remainder of his life, Bonnard worked as an artistic outsider. If his early production in the Nabis found its moment in critical history, his entire oeuvre, especially his unexplainable late work, became a litmus test towards one's understanding of modernism: Camille Pissarro called him "hideous"; the conservative art critic Camille Mauclair wrote that he mistook "the principles of decoration with those of painting, which are totally dif-

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ferent"; Christian Zervos refused to see him as a significant modern artist; Pablo Picasso called him a "potpourri of indecision" and went on—"that's not painting, what he does. . . . I don't want to be moved by him. He's not really a modern painter. . . . Bonnard is just another neo-impressionist, a decadent, the end of an old idea, not the beginning of a new one."

The low point came in 1947, the year of Bonnard's death. An essay on the artist's legacy in *Cahiers d'Art* concluded that "it is evident that this reverence is shared only by people who know nothing about the grave difficulties of art and cling above all to what is facile and agreeable." While Bonnard found allies in Guillaume Apollinaire, Thadée Natanson, Alfred Jarry, the critics Elie Faure, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Félix Fénéon, Fairfield Porter, and Leon Werth—and perhaps most importantly Henri Matisse—his future in the canon of modernism seemed far from certain.

Yet in the 1980s, like the rediscovery of late-Monet, an international reevaluation of Bonnard began to take shape. The world awakened to what Duncan Phillips had recognized five decades earlier. Writing about the Bonnard exhibition at Beaubourg in 1984, Hilton Kramer noted in these pages that "Bonnard has survived, at least until now, as a kind of displaced person in the art of our time." Time narrows in the past, of course, and Bonnard's impressionist anachronisms became less pronounced. The ideological thaw of the Eastern bloc as well as the approaching dead-end of the avant-gardes were also rendering modern art's revolutionary pose less appealing. Then too there was Bonnard's gorgeous late production to contend with, an ecstasy of paint that only the blind and the blind-folded fail to appreciate.

A new evaluation of Bonnard came together in the massive Bonnard retrospective of 1998, which showed at both the Tate Gallery, London and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. For New Yorkers the show was color-drenched Kumbh Mela. No longer would the secrets of Bonnard, cherished by the few, be either unknown or derided by the many. For the intellectual establishment, there were the catalogue essays of Sarah Whitfield and John Elderfield. Whitfield aligned Bonnard more thoroughly than before to the artistic models of the past. She also traced a line of modernist development from the Nabis and the symbolist poets of the 1890s through late Bonnard. This bypassed much of the huffing and puffing of the first decades of the twentieth century and legitimized Bonnard's artistic trajectory. Elderfield not only collected a mass of optical research and academic study to put face value on Bonnard's accomplishment, he also dismissed the attempted re-radicalization of Bonnard from those like Pierre Schneider. In his 1972 study of optics, Schneider had concluded that since Bonnard frequently placed the most important objects on the periphery of a picture, it showed that he had substituted multi-focused vision for traditional, hierarchical, centrally focused compositions.

After that show, the anti-Bonnardists launched their attacks.[2] Peter Schjeldahl, then at the *Village Voice*, now at *The New Yorker*, wrote that Bonnard was "so harmless a little master" that "his work epitomizes an art that is on its last legs as a culture-changing enterprise—practically impatient to be over and done with." In her *Art in America* review, Linda Nochlin wrote about Bonnard's bathers: "I am so repelled by the melting of a flesh-and-blood model into the molten object of desire of the male painter that I want to plunge a knife into the delectable body-surface."[2] Yet through adherence to the avant-gardes, I imagine to their own surprise, Bonnard's critics appeared retrograde. This painter, maligned in life, had been reborn. It was vindication for Duncan Phillips, and an acceptance that underscores the celebratory feeling now at his collection, where this metamorphosis began, and where it continues.

2 See "Bonnard and 'the stupidities'" (October 1998).

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Adolf Gottlieb

by Karen Wilkin

For years a wonderful little etching has hung near my desk. It commemorates an evening in 1933 when a group of young artists in Brooklyn Heights, three men and three women, celebrated their friendship, ambition, and dedication to modernism by making portraits of one another on a single etching plate. The couples were Edgar Levy and his wife Lucille Corcos, David Smith and his wife Dorothy Dehner, and Adolph Gottlieb and his wife Esther Dick. Who was to portray whom was decided by drawing lots. The result was a grid of vivid characterizations: Levy by Dick, Corcos by Dehner, Smith by Corcos, Dehner by Gottlieb, Gottlieb by Levy, and Dick by Smith. In the top left box, Corcos's slenderness is suggested by a few delicate lines. Beside her, Smith's full lips and short nose are rendered energetically; in the next square, Gottlieb's heavy-lidded eyes and natty moustache are insistently hatched. Everything is presented in ways that bear witness to the various authors' energy, their sense of camaraderie, and their shared admiration for vanguard art, especially for Picasso.

By the time the print was editioned, not long after Gottlieb's death in 1974, only Dehner, Dick, and Levy survived to sign their sections of the drawing. And by then, the playful evening's amusement of 1933 had turned into an important document of the history of American art. Each of the six protagonists had been, in his or her own way, a "player." Levy, whom Dehner later described as "a real intellectual," rarely showed his paintings in his lifetime, but the thorough understanding of modernism evident in his firm, bold portrait of Gottlieb in the etching (and confirmed by recent exhibitions of his surviving work) had made him an important source of information for his colleagues in the 1930s and 1940s. Dehner, originally a painter, in deference to her husband, became a sculptor with a steadily growing reputation after she and Smith separated, and was particularly acclaimed in the last years of her long life. Corcos became an influential, much admired illustrator. Dick set her own aspirations aside to become the indispensable artist's wife of that generation—an invaluable, hard-working helpmeet and provider of support, in every sense of the word. No need to explain what became of Smith or Gottlieb, but it's worth noting, if only for anecdotal interest, that in 1933, when the plate was first etched, an unknown Smith had just made his first welded sculptures (almost certainly the first made in the United States); Gottlieb had not yet painted any of the pictures that would establish his reputation among post-war New York abstractionists.

The distinctive faces of the two men dominate the print. That they are set side by side in the grid was probably the result of chance, but the conjunction can be read as an indication of their friendship at the time, an interpretation that is strengthened by the

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evidence of their work of the next decade or so. It's slightly remarkable that these giants of American post-war art should have been friends, given the enormous differences between a towering all-American type from Ohio and a compact Jewish boy from New York, with equally large differences in their formations as artists. (I keep thinking about the tall, largely self-taught Frenchman Braque and his short, Academy-trained Spanish "pard" Picasso, although the parallel is inexact and the two Americans never worked together as closely as the inventors of Cubism did.) Gottlieb and Smith were close contemporaries—born in 1903, Gottlieb was three years older—but when they met, probably at the Art Students League in the mid-1920s, Smith was a whole-hearted but fledgling modernist and Gottlieb a sophisticate with first-hand knowledge of the most adventurous art of the day. While Smith was growing up in a virtually art-free Midwestern town, Gottlieb had already spent an extended period in Paris and Germany, absorbing the lessons of the museums and the latest offerings of the School of Paris, having worked his passage to Europe as a seaman while still a precocious teenager. Yet it's plain that despite this initial disparity, Smith and Gottlieb as young artists had much in common.

They shared an appetite for everything from Cubism to Surrealist theory to tribal art. They responded in similar ways to these stimuli and eventually developed individual approaches informed by these diverse sources. (They also shot pool together.) Both believed, as did their friend the painter, connoisseur, mystic, and sometime dealer John Graham, that creativity was rooted in the unconscious. Like Graham, too, whose homemade theories are documented in his 1937 book *System and Dialectics of Art*, they subscribed to the Jungian notion that the unconscious was a vast repository of shared cultural memory, transcending time and place. The artist's role was not to depict the seen, but to tap into this inexhaustible font of meaning and follow its inchoate, wordless promptings to make his inner life visible.

Both Gottlieb and Smith turned these convictions into personal, powerful works of art that, while never literal, are never abstract in the usual sense. Gottlieb's paintings and Smith's sculptures are always clearly about the history of their own making and the special properties of their materials—both men were consummate masters of their crafts—but they are never *solely* or even *mainly* about such formal concerns. Instead, from first to last, Smith's and Gottlieb's work is haunted by potent overtones, elusive references, and wide-ranging but nonspecific allusions.

These deliberately courted associations are, in fact, what set the two artists apart from many of their colleagues among what came to be known as the Abstract Expressionists. It can be argued these associations are also what make their work so deeply engaging and inexhaustible. The two are further set apart by their resistance to the "signature image" that defined the efforts of most of their peers. A Gottlieb or a Smith of any period is instantly recognizable to anyone who has looked attentively at their work, but there's no *single* Gottlieb or Smith format that would be the equivalent of a Newman "zip" or Rothko floating rectangle. Rather, over time, both men explored the implications of a series of varied but interrelated structures, following implied paths that sometimes took them quite far from the generating image. (Yes, I know about Gottlieb's Bursts, with their repeated floating discs and low-lying explosive calligraphy, but they are simply his best known pictures, not his sole or principal motif.)

Today, Smith and Gottlieb's places in the pantheon of American modernism are assured, yet Gottlieb's reputation, oddly, is less stellar than that of some of his fellow Abstract Expressionists. It may have something to do with his refusal to narrow his line of inquiry over the course of his career, a theory both supported and argued against by the fact that the Bursts have become largely synonymous with "Gottlieb;" while other series, such as the seminal Pictographs of the 1940s or the provocative Imaginary

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Landscapes that followed, remain less firmly etched on the public consciousness. These days, when explanations and ideas attached to art are often valued more highly than the art itself, Gottlieb's ranking may also have something to do with his failure to justify his efforts with a body of pretentious theory, although the statements he *did* make—often at crucial moments in the development of post-war New York art—are often rightly quoted as concise, illuminating encapsulations of the concerns of the most adventurous, ambitious painters of the period.

That the full range of Gottlieb's reach remains largely unacknowledged is not surprising, given the well-merited fame of the Bursts. The celebrity of the series is not only due to its congruence with the idea that a signature image embodies an artist's most fundamental concerns, but also because the Bursts include many of Gottlieb's most memorable, seductive pictures. What is harder to understand is the lack of importance attached to the fact that he was one of the first Abstract Expressionists to produce a coherent, mature, *large* body of significant work in the 1940s; just compare a selection of Gottlieb's paintings and works on paper made between—say—1941 and 1945, when he was still mainly in his thirties, with the efforts of just about any of his fellow painters of the time.

Gottlieb declared himself an advocate of modernist notions virtually from the start, rejecting both traditional figuration and the social realism that passed for progressive art in many supposedly forward-looking circles of the 1930s. He also rejected the dry geometry of "non-objective" abstraction, which he found arbitrary and ungrounded in experience or feeling. Gottlieb's first wholly original works—the Pictographs of the 1940s—were born of a creative fusion of Cubist ideas about form with Surrealist ideas about meaning, spiced by his admiration for the forms and emotional kick of tribal art and textiles. In the Pictographs, seemingly casually drawn grids assert the continuity of the surface, canceling out any vestigial memory of the picture as a window into a fictive space. Each section of the confrontational grid presents us with a fragment of memory or an ambiguous glyph—now almost identifiable, now a geometric scribble—that is at once like an ancient rune and a wholly modern abstract "sign." Occasionally, individual glyphs insist on linking across the boundaries of the grid, intensifying the shifts of scale, and adding further ambiguity to the images. The Pictographs resonate. They seem pregnant with meaning, but just what that meaning is remains impossible to say, which is part of their strength. (Gottlieb once observed that when he figured out exactly what a particular glyph meant to him he could no longer use it.) These mysterious paintings are further distinguished by their astonishing color and their ravishing touch, an expressive range of hues and surfaces encompassing the frankly beautiful, the subtle, the abrasive, and the somber. As a consistent body of tough, wide-ranging work, the Pictographs are virtually unrivalled by anything any of Gottlieb's contemporaries were producing at the time.

As his work evolved, over the next three decades of his life, Gottlieb scaled up both his canvases and the elements disposed on them, dissecting the disciplining grids and emotionally charged glyphs of the Pictographs into larger oppositions. He gradually pared down the multivalent imagery of his early series into the elemental oppositions of the Bursts, without losing any of myriad associations of their polarities. These polarities included painting languages and real material contrasts, as well as implied allusions. The emotional drama of Gottlieb's work, at any period, is carried by different ways of putting down paint, different kinds of edges, and different surface densities. Drawing can be calligraphic, cursive, exquisitely delicate, or deliberately brutal, overscaled, nearly ham-fisted. Crisp geometry is played against "artless" scribbling or soft blurs. (Among Gottlieb's contemporaries, of course, Hans Hofmann's work can be described in identical terms, while the sculpture of his old friend Smith similarly

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depends on a subtle orchestration of sculptural materials and means.) The best of Gottlieb's pictures do all this with a near-Japanese economy that leaves no doubt about his ability to extract maximum eloquence from placement and maximum drama from nuances of color and surface. At his best, Gottlieb is self-evidently an extraordinarily inventive painter impossible to ignore, so why is he still underrated?

In the interests of full disclosure, I should say that while I obviously think Gottlieb's work speaks for itself, I'm probably not completely objective about him. My father was his doctor and the two men were friends. Gottlieb's loft in a former bank building on the Bowery was the first important downtown artist's studio I ever visited. It made a big impression on a teenager raised on the Upper West Side, even more than his next, more luxurious, two-floor living-studio on West Broadway, which I visited as an adult. Gottlieb was notably kind and generous to me, first when I was a student, and later, a fledgling curator. I had the privilege of going around his last New York show with him, when he was confined to a wheelchair after suffering a stroke in 1970, and listening to his diffident comments on a group of sensuous, ambitious paintings that showed no sign of debility. I saw him last towards the very end of his life, when I had begun organizing an exhibition of the Pictographs. He was working on the monotypes that engaged him until a couple of weeks before his death, drawing on a board placed across the arms of his wheelchair. And I should say that it was Esther Gottlieb who gave me the etching. But even absent this connection and some fond memories, I feel certain that it is the potency of Gottlieb's work that has allied me with those who rank him among the most important American painters of the twentieth century and who wonder at the lingering resistance to his receiving full recognition. For those of us in this camp—which included the usually cantankerous Clement Greenberg—this is a discrepancy in desperate need of correction.

Recently, help seemed at hand. This past Spring, two exhibitions appeared to signal a new effort to give Gottlieb his due, a solo at Pace-Wildenstein, focusing mainly on well-known types of images, and a fascinating show of Gottlieb and his life-long friends Milton Avery and Mark Rothko, at Knoedler, examining mature works made in Provincetown by the three artists. (In spite of stiff competition from some terrific large Averys, a couple of dazzling Gottlieb Imaginary Landscapes dominated the show.) Now, a retrospective, "Adolph Gottlieb: A Survey Exhibition,"[1] organized by the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation for the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, has been installed at the Jewish Museum.

The first thing to be said is that the show looks splendid in the museum's galleries, freshly and sensitively updated by Calvin Tsao. The next thing to be said is that it is an intelligent overview that gives a sense of Gottlieb's trajectory, beginning with works from the 1930s that demonstrate how much he learned from Milton Avery, early on—although they make plain, too, that Gottlieb was the more adventurous colorist, at the time—and continuing with Pictographs, Imaginary Landscapes, Bursts, late Burst variations, and unnamable free-wheeling compositions of the 1960s and 1970s. The show tracks Gottlieb's responses to Joan Miró in the 1940s. It follows his part in his generation of New York painters' conversations about the expressive possibilities of the raw materials of painting, questions of scale, and issues of content. The later works in the show reinforce the suggestion that Miró, in *his* later years, collected fully on the debt New York painters of Gottlieb's generation owed him by adopting the expansive scale, generous drawing, and—possibly—the compositional strategies of the Bursts.

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1 "Adolph Gottlieb: A Survey Exhibition" opened at the Jewish Museum, New York, on October 11, 2002 and remains on view until March 2, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by IVAM Centre Julio González (137 pages, $25 [paper only]).

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On the plus side, the show includes some glorious pictures that give us Gottlieb at his best. *Sounds at Night* (1948, Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation) is a deconstructed Pictograph, the grid shattered by the pressure of enigmatic white glyphs that seem to have floated to the surface through layers of shifting shapes. The image is wholly Gottlieb's, but its somber black, white, gray, and brown palette, like its tattered geometry, also makes it a kind of exegesis on the role of Cubism in American abstraction. *Labyrinth #3* (1954, Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation) expands the implications of *Sounds at Night*. An enormous horizontal web of broad, uninhibited strokes, the picture is dominated by a warped grid of fat black bands; half-glimpsed images, clusters of brushmarks, and a delicate tracery of drawing in a range of yellows from murky ochre to pure lemon pulse against and through the assertive blacks. Scale shifts as we look, changing the expanse from confrontational surface to barrier. *Red at Night* (1956, Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation) turns the basic horizontal divisions of the Imaginary Landscapes—tangled "earth" below, "sky" punctuated with hovering discs or bars above—into a chthonic battle between opaque layers of dark calligraphy out of which black shapes wrench themselves free into a zone of brilliant red; a vertical stroke of dull green pries loose the space in the painting, by sheer insistence. Among the later works, the standouts include the deceptively modest *Three Elements* (1964, Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation), which rings changes on the Burst format, separating a black disc and starfish-like explosion of calligraphy with a row of floating rectangles, all vibrating against a brushy salmon-pink ground. A post-stroke *Burst* (1973, Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation) with its shifting "haloes" and fragile spatter of drawing, at once tremulous and assertive, bears witness to the aging painter's simultaneous infirmity and undiminished powers.

But—and I wish I didn't have to say this—the show is a missed opportunity. Why this is so should be clear from the provenances of the works I've mentioned. The selection was restricted, apparently for reasons of economy, to paintings from Gottlieb's estate. (Only two pictures come from other sources, a private collection and IVAM in Valencia.) While the Foundation holds many important works, a great many more of the most compelling pictures are in private and public collections throughout the United States and abroad—including, for example, the two wonderful paintings at Knoedler this spring. The selection then, does not offer us the finest, most characteristic Gottliebs available (in the opinion of the curators), but the most readily obtainable ones. As a result, we get an incomplete view of the painter's capabilities. The exhibited Pictographs, for example, don't span the full spectrum from recognizable fragments to indecipherable but fraught emblems. The Imaginary Landscapes are given short shrift and many of the Bursts are, instead of the exhilarating elemental images we've all encountered, a little like—there's no polite way of saying it—leftovers. Strangely, too, the selection makes it difficult to grasp what a truly remarkable colorist Gottlieb was. (The muddy, inaccurate reproductions in the otherwise useful catalogue won't help in retrospect, either.)

"Adolph Gottlieb: A Survey Exhibition" is a well-intentioned, much-needed show that we should be grateful for seeing. But it is not a definitive exhibition, and that is what is needed if Gottlieb is to be properly evaluated: a gathering of his best, most telling work, brought together from no matter where, an exhibition that charts his evolution by reassembling related pictures and tracing continuous threads and deviations alike, in order to present the full story of Gottlieb's development and achievement. Unfortunately, the art world being what it is, the show at the Jewish Museum is likely to be the Gottlieb exhibition of record for some time to come. When will Adolph Gottlieb get his due?

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The writings of Henry Moore

by Eric Gibson

"It is a mistake for a sculptor or painter to speak or write very often about his job," cautioned Henry Moore in 1937, relatively early in his career. "It releases tension needed for his work." Strange, then, that over the next fifty years (he died in 1986 at eighty-eight) Moore was to prove one of the most voluble of artists. When not carving one of his familiar reclining female figures, most of them bearing his signature sculptural idiom, the hole, Moore accepted invitations to set down his reminiscences and his thoughts on art—his own work and that of other artists and periods. And in the decades after World War II, he made himself available for interviews on a scale more in keeping with a politician than a practicing artist.

In 1966, the English curator and critic Philip James published "Henry Moore on Sculpture," an anthology culled from over sixty published sources. Ten years ago, the Henry Moore Foundation issued a five-volume comprehensive bibliography that listed over six hundred utterances. Even allowing for reprints and foreign language versions, that is an extraordinary amount. Now Alan Wilkinson, author of the definitive study of the artist's drawings, has published *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations.*[1]

1 *Henry Moore: Writings and Conversations*, by Alan Wilkinson; University of California Press, 320 pages, $50.

The new book contains most of the material that appeared in the first anthology. This includes such seminal texts as "The Nature of Sculpture" (1930), "Mesopotamian Art" (1935), "The Sculptor Speaks" (1937), "Primitive Art" (1941), "The Hidden Struggle" (1957), and "The Michelangelo Vision" (1964). In addition, drawing on the invaluable resource of the bibliography, as well as the foundation's archives, Mr. Wilkinson has included two early texts not in James: an important letter from the mid-1920s in which Moore describes his visits to the Musée Guimet and the Louvre, and a 1932 interview with Arnold Haskell. Finally, it adds material that has appeared since, such as important statements on Rodin and Giovanni Pisano as well as a moving tribute to Giacometti.

All in all, Wilkinson has produced an indispensable book. But reader (and scholar) beware: Moore was an articulate, sometimes eloquent, commentator on art. When it came to his own art, however, his aim was almost always to point us away from his work rather than to lead us deeper into it.

How many of today's artists would have the modesty to describe what they do as just a "job"? That same spirit informs Moore's writing. His statements are never hectoring, bombastic or obscurantist. There is no toying with the interviewer in the manner of Picasso. Nor was Moore given to the kind of visionary, dreamlike narratives or philosophical musings favored by Giaco-

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metti. The approach is down-to-earth, the prose workmanlike.

Both the James and Wilkinson books are organized by subject—Moore's biography, his views on other artists and periods of art, and his thoughts on his own work. But read chronologically, the entries give us a clearer sense of Moore's evolution both as an artist and a writer. Thus, the pulse of passion is most evident in the early pieces—two letters from his student years written during a traveling scholarship that took him to Paris and Italy in 1924. Their run-on sentences and categorical judgments about art reflect his youthful intensity. Moore at this stage was already a committed modernist, believing in the supremacy of carving over modeling and the superiority of non-Western art over the Greco-Roman tradition, or what he was to refer to a few years later as "the complete domination of later decadent Greek art as the only standard of excellence." This trip is famous in accounts of the artist's life for the aesthetic and emotional crisis it precipitated when his exposure to the riches of Renaissance art forced him to rethink this doctrinaire rejection of the Western canon.

Those conflicting currents are already evident in these letters. Paris, he writes in the letter discovered by Mr. Wilkinson, is "a dull hole," with the Louvre hardly meriting a mention, although Mantegna does catch his eye. But the Musée Guimet gets a long, excited paragraph in which Moore singles out an Indian figure as "one of the finest pieces of sculpture I've ever seen." Once in Italy, "the work of Giotto, Orcagna, Lorenzetti, Taddeo Gaddi, the paintings leading up to and including Masaccio's are what have so far interested me most." On the other hand, "[o]f great sculpture I've seen very little—Giotto's painting is the finest sculpture I met in Italy—what I know of Indian, Egyptian and Mexican sculpture completely overshadows Renaissance sculpture." About the only exceptions are late Michelangelo and Donatello. But here, too, there is a qualification: "Donatello was a modeller," he writes, "and it seems to me that it is modelling that has sapped the manhood out of Western sculpture."

The tone shifts in the 1930s and 1940s, becoming more coolly analytical. Moore seems to be examining as much as articulating an idea, turning it over in his head as if it were one of the stones or bone fragments he had begun picking up during his outings as potential source material for his sculpture. These are Moore's most productive decades as a writer, both in terms of output and what he has to say. In four of the six key texts of this period—"A View of Sculpture" (also known as "The Nature of Sculpture" in James's book), "On Carving" (the Haskell interview), "Unit One" and "The Sculptor Speaks"—Moore lays out his artistic credo: the importance of the human figure (it is "what interests me most deeply"); the relationship between representation and abstraction ("[sculptures should be] creations, new in themselves, not merely feats of copying, nor of memory, having only the second-hand life of realistic waxworks"); truth to materials ("Sculpture in stone should look like stone, hard and concentrated"); the penetration of the sculptural mass ("The hole connects one side to the other, making [the work] immediately more three-dimensional. . . . A hole can itself have as much shape as a solid mass"); the need for "vitality" in sculpture ("a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent"); and the importance of natural forms ("from which [the sculptor] learns such principles as balance, rhythm, organic growth of life, attraction and repulsion, harmony and contrast").

These are the decades when Moore came into his own not only as an artist but as a critic of art. Indeed the two were intertwined. As an art student in London in the early 1920s, Moore had read Roger Fry's *Vision and Design*, later crediting Fry's essay "Negro Sculpture" with opening his eyes to the collections of the British Museum. In the 1930 "A View of Sculpture," Moore reflects something of Fry's formalist outlook when he writes of the need to pay attention

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to "the intrinsic emotional significance of shapes instead of seeing mainly a representational value." By the end of the decade he has moved beyond Fry, declaring in "The Sculptor Speaks" that "It might seem from what I have said of shape and form that I regard them as ends in themselves. Far from it. I am very much aware that associational psychological factors play a large part in sculpture. . . . Each particular carving I make takes on in my mind a human, or occasionally animal, character and personality, and this personality controls its design and formal qualities, and makes me satisfied or dissatisfied with the work as it develops."

The two other important essays from this period are "Mesopotamian Art," a book review, and "Primitive Art." It's clear from these that Moore's regular visits to the British Museum had turned him into nothing less than a connoisseur of sculpture—steeped in the history of different periods and cultures, familiar with the literature, attuned to nuances of style and iconography, and able to move easily from broad generalizations to a telling insight about a single, closely-observed object. Here is Moore on Sumerian art:

> For me, Sumerian sculpture ranks with Early Greek, Etruscan, Ancient Mexican, Fourth and Twelfth Dynasty Egyptian and Romanesque and early Gothic sculpture, as the great sculpture of the world. It shows a richness of feeling for life and its wonder and mystery, welded to direct plastic statement born of real creative urge. . . . [I]ts greatest achievement is found in the free-standing pieces . . . and these have tremendous power and yet sensitiveness. . . .
>
> See the alabaster figure of a woman which is in the British Museum . . . with her tiny hands clasped in front of her. It is as though the head and the hands were the two equal focal points of the figure—one cannot look at the head without being conscious also of the held hands. But in almost all Sumerian works the hands have a sensitiveness and significance; even in the very earliest terracotta figures, where each hand seems no more than four scratches, there is a wealth of meaning there.

Beginning in the 1950s, the tone shifts again. Now it is detached, orotund, Olympian—the official voice of the world-renowned artist. "The Sculptor in Modern Society," a 1952 address to an international conference of artists sponsored by UNESCO and Moore's longest piece of writing, reads as if it had been written by a committee of bureaucrats. A typical sentence reads, "The specialization, due to psychological factors in the individual artist, may conflict with the particular economic structure of society in which the artist finds himself." This change is most striking when Moore returns to an earlier subject. Writing again on Mesopotamian art in 1974 he begins, "It is my profound conviction that the testimony of the past must not be ignored. A knowledge of our history can be of great use in our life." He sounds like a mayor at a ribbon cutting.

Perhaps we should not entirely blame Moore for these bromides. By the early 1950s, he was Britain's foremost artist and the public face of modern sculpture worldwide. His rise coincided with the invention of the modern media culture, creating an incessant and unprecedented demand for interviews and pronouncements. Moore, who had risen from humble origins by, literally and figuratively, the sweat of his brow, was justifiably proud of his place in English society. And he was a naturally open, accessible personality. The pressure to respond to the barrage of entreaties must have been nearly irresistible.

But when it mattered to him, he could summon up again the private, personal voice of the artist. Moore's visual acuity is evident in later discussions of artists whose work he admired, in particular in his comments on Michelangelo's "Rondanini Pietà," Rodin's "Walking Man," and Cézanne's bathers. His admiration for Giovanni Pisano, whose work he saw for the first time on his traveling scholarship in the 1920s, is expressed in a 1974 essay that surely found a whole new audience for this extraordinary but little-known Italian Gothic sculptor. It reverberates with the old passion and keenness of observation. "The drill technique

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was a very special mark of the Pisano school, but Giovanni used it as an expressive instrument as well as a practical one," Moore writes. "He used it to give colour and texture to a surface so that if he wanted to make a beard have darkness, he would so drill it that it would take on a colour and texture seen from a distance."

When it came to the art of his own time, though, Moore was on less sure ground. He could be glib, even philistine, about artists or movements he disliked. Van Gogh's painting is dismissed as "panicky," born of "weakness." Non-objective art lacks humanity, "forbidding the artist to use so much mental & human & visual experience that it can never have the fullness & richness of meaning that art with a human reference with human drama has."

Still, Moore went against the grain in championing Renoir when it wasn't fashionable to do so, lobbying hard in 1961 for the National Gallery to purchase two 1909 paintings of dancing female figures. And he captured the essence of Giacometti in an almost poetic turn of phrase, telling John Russell in 1961 that in Giacometti's figurative work, "the armature has once again become the life-line of the sculpture."

When it came to his own work, however, it is a different story. Moore used words to draw a curtain between the outside world and his deepest artistic impulses. The idea was to conceal rather than reveal. Only once do we feel we are privy to the innermost recesses of his artistic thought. This is in "The Hidden Struggle" of 1957, Moore's last major overarching aesthetic statement, from 1957 and in many ways his most important.

> There is one quality I find in all the artists I admire most . . . . I mean a disturbing element, a distortion, giving evidence of a struggle or some sort. . . . I personally believe that all life is a conflict; that's something to be accepted. . . . One must try to find a synthesis, to come to terms with opposite qualities. Art and life are made up of conflicts. . . . I think really that in great art, i.e., in the art I find great, this conflict is hidden, it is unsolved. . . . All that is bursting with energy is disturbing—not perfect. It is the quality of life. The other is the quality of the ideal. It could never satisfy me. . . . This disturbing quality of life goes hand in hand with the disturbing quality of our time. . . . [People] do not understand the basic character of their age. They want to escape. Many of them expect of art perfect craftsmanship, artifacts. . . . Never once did I want to make what I thought of as a "beautiful" woman. This does not mean that I don't want beauty in what I do. Beauty is a deeper concept than perfection or niceness, or attractiveness or sweetness, prettiness. To me, "beautiful" is much more than that. I find a bull more beautiful than a frisking lamb . . . or a big fleshy beech-tree trunk more beautiful than an orchid.

"The Hidden Struggle" is Moore's least fluid piece of writing. The word "struggle," for example, seems to have more than one meaning. But his overall message is clear: the truth of art lies below the surface, not on it. His own work possesses many of these same qualities, a "disturbing element," a synthesis of opposites. There is a recurring note of anxiety, even anguish in it. Within a given sculpture, ease is interchangeable with unease, succor with a sense of acute vulnerability, sleep with death. The only thing is, Moore here isn't talking about his own work, except obliquely. The focus of his discussion is the great masters of the past: Rembrandt, Cézanne, Masaccio, Michelangelo, Piero, and others. Yet one cannot help feeling his real subject is himself. There is something about the essay's hesitations, its abrupt changes in direction and the simple, even stark, statements of principle that suggest the discomfort of someone accustomed to revealing little of themselves finally opening up. Because when speaking of his own work, Moore made sure to keep the struggle hidden. Most of what he says is purely anecdotal. He almost never addresses what he is trying to say through his forms. When he speaks of his materials, we learn only about their physical, not their associational properties. It isn't that Moore's

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words about his work aren't helpful. The problem is that, contrary to the rule about taking an artist's statements with a grain of salt, Moore's interpreters, from the very beginning, have accepted them at face value and looked no further. There has been a great deal of insightful writing about Moore. But Moore's own writings have had an extraordinary influence in shaping the discussion of his work. There is a kind of "Moore litany" that permeates the literature, a linear narrative that has been the perennial template for Moore criticism. Those topics—Castleford, art school first in Leeds then in London, the British Museum, "truth to materials," the trip to Italy, bones and pebbles, the Shelter Drawings—were accepted as the only keys to understanding his art. Those he ignored or preferred not to go into were set aside. As a result, there is much about his sources and influences and his iconography that remains unexplored.

Take the matter of the First World War. Moore enlisted in the army in 1916 at age eighteen, was sent to the Western Front, and saw action at Cambrai. He was gassed and invalided home. His biographer, Roger Berthoud, wrote that the after-effects of gas poisoning lingered throughout his life, a constant reminder of his war experience. "[Moore's] voice was from then on prone to huskiness. In moments of strong emotion it sometimes failed him altogether."

In succeeding years Moore rarely spoke about the war. One can easily understand why. Less easy to understand is why critics and scholars should have interpreted this reluctance as an indication that it had no bearing on his artistic development and left its impact unexplored. In his 1966 monograph on Moore, Herbert Read, who should have known better considering how deeply marked he had been by his time at the Western Front, blithely characterized Moore's war service as "a great adventure." Philip James didn't address it at all in his anthology. Mr. Wilkinson does, including six statements. One is the 1968 observation to the photographer John Hedgecoe that "I was not horrified by the war, I wanted to win a medal and be a hero." Two others are excerpts from letters Moore wrote to Alice Gostick, his elementary school art teacher and mentor, from the front. Largely unrevealing, they would seem to confirm the conventional wisdom that the war had no impact on Moore. Instead, they illustrate the risks of relying on Moore as the exclusive guide to his life and work.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell speaks of the danger of looking to letters from the Front for an authoritative account of their writer's experiences. "Few soldiers wrote the truth in letters home," he tells us. "The trick was to fill the page by saying nothing and to offer the maximum number of clichés. . . . The main motive determining these conventions was a decent solicitude for the feelings of the recipient. What possible good could result from telling the truth?" And he concludes with a warning: "[A]ny historian would err badly who relied on letters for factual testimony about the war."

There is another letter by Moore, written to a friend in 1919 or 1920. By then the war had ended and the reality of its horrors had become so widely known that there was no longer any need for euphemism. Unlike the other letters, this one is filled with raw, uncensored emotion: "The one great mistake in religion as I have know it, is the belief it creates in one that God is Almighty. He is strong & powerful & Good; but were he Almighty, the things I saw and experienced, the great bloodshed & the pain, the insufferable agony & depravity, the tears & the inhuman devilishness of the war, would, could never have been." This letter is listed and excerpted in the Moore bibliography. Yet by omitting it Mr. Wilkinson suggests that he, too, subscribes to the received view that Moore emerged from his service unmarked.

One wonders if Moore's war experience is the source of the dark strain that runs through his art. In the catalog to his 1994 exhibition, "A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the First World War," the art his-

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torian and critic Richard Cork (the first person to explore the possible impact of the war on Moore's art) proposed that the source of the stump leg in the 1952 "Warrior With Shield" was not, as Moore had once said, "a pebble I found on the seashore in the summer of 1952 and which reminded me of the stump of a leg amputated at the hip," but rather the memory "of similar deformations Moore [had] observed at Cambrai. He saw many of his fellow soldiers receive fatal wounds during [the battle]; and . . . the patients he found [after arriving at the field hospital] could easily have included soldiers with bodily truncations as grievous as the amputated warrior Moore modeled thirty-five years later." Art historical overreaching? Perhaps, except that (which Cork does not mention) the stump leg had already appeared in a 1934 reclining figure, the one usually interpreted as little more than a gloss on Giacometti's "Woman With Her Throat Cut." In other words, long before Moore took that walk on the beach, the stump leg motif was a part of his art. Moreover it is one of three that recur throughout Moore's work, the other two being heads cleft almost in two and heads thrown back with the mouth wide open.

It isn't only in his published discourse but in his titles, too, that Moore wishes to avoid revealing too much. They are mostly simple, descriptive titles such as "Reclining Figure" and "Mother and Child" that make no effort to indicate the often wide variations of feeling in each one. And, as with his other words, it is dangerous to take them at face value. A 1936 sculpture called, simply, "Carving," is a stone cylinder, its wider upper half angled slightly off axis and capped by a flat plane into which a pattern of geometric forms—circles and rectangles—is carved in a relief design that strongly resembles the abstractions of Ben Nicholson. Although it looks like one of Moore's few forays into complete abstraction, many writers have interpreted it as a stylized head, the abstract relief the "face", with a "nose" formed by a raised L-shaped rectangle and "eyes" and a "mouth" small sunken circles. What seems to have been overlooked, however, is that seen in this way, the sculpture reads as an image of anguish, a head thrown back with mouth agape. In thus using the language of geometric abstraction for the face, Moore has put the most cerebral, rational, artistic vocabulary to the service of the most intense kind of expressionism. Some "carving."

In using words as he did, Moore wasn't being coy or disingenuous. He was protecting himself. Moore's biographer Roger Berthoud hit upon this point in an amusing prefatory anecdote about the frustrations of getting Moore to talk. "[He] had long since worked out an edited version of his life and thoughts, no doubt to reduce the psychic drain of countless interviews," writes Berthoud. "When I asked him questions calculated to guarantee a fresh response, he would—with a skill which one could but admire—steer his way back to one of the trusted old gramophone records with a couple of bridging sentences, only to break off with the words, 'but I've told you that before, haven't I, Roger.'"

In the end Moore was able to have it both ways, to "speak or write very often about his job," yet retain "the tension needed for his work." It had been the pattern of Moore's life to do what was expected of him in one corner of it in order to gain the freedom to do what he wanted where it mattered the most—in the studio, and this was no exception. Moore's "gramophone records" allowed him to discharge his obligations as a public figure and still function as an artist. But he paid a price for this success. The statements that gave the public what it wanted sold his work short, too often leaving the impression that what Moore said about his work is all there was to be said about it. He deserves better. Moore created a body of work whose depths we have yet to fully sound, much less thoroughly plumb. Perhaps it is time to lay his words aside and let his art speak for itself.

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New poems
by Chelsea Rathburn

Teaching poetry at the school for the blind

Their struggle to meet the image in the dark
is one we know—the storms, the hesitation—
but the shifting bridge they walk between idea
and braille's brief physical translation

reveals the sometimes lightness of our thoughts,
our casual groping for a better word,
as easy, slight as calling to our love
or remembering the chorus of a song we heard.

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Love song

There's poetry in this business of love,
in the slow dancing fall into bed,
when, after all our false attempts,
the earnest lines we've heard and said,
two clumsy, tumbling, unlike things
are finally, briefly one.

There's no need then to say that this
is the cause and worth of everything;
we can stop trying to get it right.
The room we're in is all we know
and all we'll ever need to know,
the finished verses, the kiss goodnight.

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Unused lines

While words we pamper and protect
march off in search of meager fame,
these lines like bastard kids collect,
skulking through our notes in shame,

the discards of our intellect,
false starts, limp rhymes, feet bruised and lame,
condemned to suffer in neglect,
half-breeds that we refuse to name

for fear they'll prove what we suspect:
the damned and saved are much the same.

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Theater

No vital sparks

by Mark Steyn

There's a difference between a bad performance and miscasting. The former can be redeemed, the latter is insurmountable. A. R. Gurney's *Sylvia* a few years ago provided a classic example: This is the story of a happily married middle-aged man who gets a new puppy and discovers that his emotional investment in the dog is destabilizing his marriage. At the height of his infatuation, he sits on the couch and serenades her with Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye." At the Manhattan Theatre Club, the pooch was played by Sarah Jessica Parker (pre-"Sex and the City") and she was awfully cute with her hair pulled in high-tied bunches to suggest doggie ears and her gangly legs romping round the room. With Miss Parker occupying the kennel, the play's conceit—a pet as sublimated adultery—was plausible.

In London, they cast Zoe Wanamaker—a terrific actress with a much broader ranger than Miss Parker, but twenty years older, less pert, less leggy, less puppyish. None of this is her fault, but certainly her agent and the producers should have seen it: she was about the same age as her middle-aged owner and so at a stroke the visual key to the play—the puppy as affair—was lost, and what was left on stage seemed weird but no longer believable. One of the producers told me that their thinking was that Zoe Wanamaker has a very distinctive face, with an upturned nose and a vaguely canine upper lip, and so they figured she'd look more like an actual dog. But she's not meant to look like a dog, she's meant to be an au pair in shaggy clothing. The play never recovered from their decision.

If the London producers were being too literal, the opposite problem afflicts *A Man of No Importance* at Lincoln Center's Newhouse Theatre. This is a musical adaptation of a very slight 1994 British film, about a bus conductor—in Dublin, in 1964—who regales his passengers with purple poetry by Oscar Wilde and eventually stages an amateur production of *Salome*. He is also a deeply closeted homosexual. In other words, what it's about is the secret life within the drab exterior—the bright, burning passion inside the dour Dublin working-class bus clippy. With the title role in *Sylvia*, you cast the internal—the young beauty the dog symbolizes. With the title role in *A Man of No Importance*, you cast the exterior. Sylvia mustn't look like a dog, but it's vital that Alfie Burns look like a Dublin bus conductor. In the film, Albert Finney did—big, blokey, beefy, burly, and wonderfully weathered by the years, he brought a tremendous dotty naïveté to the character that was utterly convincing.

At Lincoln Center, Roger Rees looks like anything but a Dublin bus conductor. There is no surprise or contradiction in discovering he likes poetry and theater, because he looks like he does. What he doesn't look like is a fellow who clips your ticket. Mr. Rees is a fine RSC actor best known to Americans

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for a stint on "Cheers" as a sneering Brit and, while one must deplore these crude ethnic stereotypes, those sitcom chaps understand the ground rules. Years ago I was standing in the check-out line at a grocery store and heard the couple behind me discussing the cover of *TV Guide*, on which the cast of "Cheers" was posed in two-hundredth-episode special sweatshirts. "Doesn't Robin [Rees's character] look a dork in that shirt?" said one. Just so. He is not a casual figure. He is not a man for the ill-fitting busman's jacket and the poorly knotted tie and the shirt collar flapping over the lapel. Cast as such, he violates a principle the "Cheers" producers understood—that at a certain level you have to be who you're playing.

If you ever go to am-dram nights at your local church hall, you'll notice that this is the most obvious deficiency: Mildred reads the lines well enough, but she's a little stout and mumsy to be the ingénue; there's nothing terribly wrong with the dashing playboy duke's performance except that he's bow-legged and has four chins. If the gulf between art and life is that yawning during *Private Lives* or *The Desert Song*, imagine how it would gape if you did *Salome*, Wilde's fin-de-siècle haze of decadence.

In the film, Finney caught perfectly the inaptness of the obsession. In its way, it's a story about miscasting—about who you are and who you're forced by circumstance to play. By contrast, when Roger Rees, with his long, finely chiseled features and his slender form, starts spouting poetry and rehearsing *Salome*, he looks like what he is: a great London stage actor. He should be at the Gate not on the buses. As for the submerged homosexuality, if there's any quality Rees projects it's fastidiousness.

The evening can never recover from the miscasting. A big blokey bus driver determining to stage *Salome* is a startling idea; Roger Rees doing it isn't. Whether one shares the view of the noisier scholars that this is Wilde's great "beard play"—that Wilde is Salome, and John the Baptist his beloved Bosie, etc.—is of less importance than that, in the case of Alfie, the matter is not in doubt: in *Salome*, the frustrations of his life—literary, romantic, sexual—find full expression. The key to Alfie's story lies in that fundamentally un-American concept, the charm of amateurishness: like *Salad Days* or *Stepping Out*, success depends on the rough edges. At Lincoln Center, they've all been smoothed out to the point where, unlike the film, you don't notice the characters for the great holes in the plot. Why is Alfie so determined to stage his production of *Salome* in a church hall? It would be a provocation in Dublin today, and thirty-eight years ago would have been unthinkable. But then it's not clear that the authors have paid much attention to the play-within-the-play. There's one wacky moment when Carney, who's playing Herod, grumbles that he hasn't got the lead role—i.e., John the Baptist. Huh? Wilde's *Salome* is pretty much a non-stop show-off for whoever's playing Herod: he dominates the piece. When Steven Berkoff staged a memorably idiosyncratic *Salome* about a decade ago at the National Theatre in London, it would never have occurred to him to play anyone other than Herod.

As for the gay subtext, it's true that Dublin in the Sixties was a small, parochial backwater but it beggars belief that most folks wouldn't have been perfectly clear about what's really meant when Alfie starts calling the adored driver of his bus "Bosie." Gregory Ratoff's film biography of Wilde, with Robert Morley sloughing off epigrams, had recently been a big hit and, for its day, unusually candid in its treatment of his, ah, legal difficulties. Ireland, like most Catholic countries in that period, had a somewhat nuanced approach to issues like homosexuality: Michael MacLiammoir and Hilton Edwards lived openly as a thespian couple, and, in the period *A Man of No Importance* is set, MacLiammoir's one-man Oscar Wilde compilation was a great crowd-puller in part because everyone understood the, um, particular kinship the

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actor felt for his material. At MacLiammoir's state funeral, live on Irish TV, the Taoiseach and other assembled dignitaries crossed over the grave to shake hands with Edwards and say, "I'm sorry for your trouble, Hilton"—the traditional expression of sympathy to the widow. I believe this was the first formal acknowledgment of homosexuality in Irish history.

But the specifics of the situation are of no interest to the adaptors here. That shouldn't be a surprise. *A Man of No Importance* has been musicalized by Terrence McNally (book), Stephen Flaherty (music), and Lynn Ahrens (lyrics). Between them, these are the guys who write everything. McNally is the celebrated author of *Corpus Christi*, the famous play about the "gay Jesus" which earned him a death sentence from the "Islamic Parliament" in Britain, though, fatwa-wise, it seems to be a bit of a low-key unpaid-parking-ticket kind of a death sentence. Whatever the merits of his faux provocations at the Manhattan Theatre Club, he does at least seem to have some personal stake in his plays; his musicals, in comparison (from *The Rink* to *The Full Monty*), are the worst kind of assignment writing—functioning, efficient, but without that vital spark that brings them to life. Put him with Ahrens and Flaherty and you've the perfect recipe for polite, tasteful torpor. I think the last collaboration of theirs I reviewed here was *Ragtime*, adapted from E. L. Doctorow, and I'll bet that pretty much everything I could say about this show I've already said about that one. As always, it feels like an end-of-term entry for a course in theatrical adaptation—competent, intelligent, well-organized, stylistically coherent. But it doesn't feel like a musical any of 'em wanted to write, if it weren't that someone had optioned the property and someone put together the deal and someone brought in Lincoln Center and finally someone said "Now all we need is a couple of guys to write this thing." This was a defect of *Ragtime* and *The Full Monty* and *Once on This Island*, but it's even worse here because *A Man of No Importance* is a story about passion or it's nothing, and what McNally, Flaherty, and Ahrens have given us is a story about passion with no passion in the telling. Where the film was sentimental and manipulative, the show is suppressed and tentative.

As usual, Ahrens and Flaherty's most irritating habit is the one-word song title. This time round, we have "Art," "Books," "Confession," "Princess." A title is the focus of the song: it gives you something to work up to, something to prove. Without it, you get flabby, musically and lyrically. I'm not saying you can't have good songs with one-word titles—"Oklahoma!," "Laura," "Goldfinger"—but generally they're a bit more specific than "Art" or "Books." "Things," Bobby Darin's deft little pop hit, might seem to fall into the "Art"/"Books" trap, but he knows the point he wants to make and he imposes form on the material. Flaherty and Ahrens never do. Their titles have always been terrible, and they're getting worse: "First Rehearsal," "Confusing Times." Lynn Ahrens specializes in a lot of Big Thoughts—"real life seems so long ago"—but, beached in great shapeless tracts, they never take off.

After sitting through an evening with Flaherty and Ahrens, it's difficult to subscribe to the conventional wisdom that *Flower Drum Song* has a third-rate score. It may be third-rate Rodgers and Hammerstein, but that still puts it well ahead of 90 percent of the somnolent *Man of No Importance*. Speaking of one-word titles, there's "Sunday," that lovely lazy ballad of weekend contentment: "Sunday Sweet Sunday with nothing to do."

Flower Drum Song was a modest hit in its day—1958—and it's rightly regarded as the weakest of R&H's East-meets-West shows, after *South Pacific* and *The King and I*. The original novel (1957) by C. Y. Lee is a slice of life from San Francisco's Chinatown, written with a non-Asian audience in mind. The Fifties were one huge conveyor belt of ethnic fads—"Mambo Italiano," calypso, *West Side Story*—and Rodgers, Hammerstein and

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Joe Fields figured they could stake an early claim to the next passing fancy. *Flower Drum Song* opened shortly after *The World of Suzy Wong* and was promptly dubbed by Kenneth Tynan "the world of woozy song."

To the casual observer, the main point of interest in a *Flower Drum* revival is: what the hell are they going to do about that script? Inventive enough to peddle more than one stereotypical Chinaman, the Hammerstein/Fields book gets its yuks from two sources: the proudly unassimilated Oriental codgers who say things like "all white men look alike to me," and their flashy progeny, so desperate to go native that they wind up as a garish cartoon hotchpotch of mangled Americanisms. Whether or not these twin props of the old *Flower Drum* were "authentic" is neither here nor there. In identity politics, there's no authenticity, only changing fashion: One thinks of Harry Lee, Cambridge graduate, respected barrister and, in the words of one British politician, "the best bloody Englishman east of Suez." In order to lead Singapore to independence, he learned Mandarin, adopted Confucianism and transformed himself into Lee Kuan Yew. That's really what's happening to *Flower Drum Song*: the R&H version is not unfaithful to C. Y. Lee, but the anglo-friendly Orientalisms of the novel are too eager to please and so, like Harry Lee in Singapore, C. Y. Lee in San Francisco has to be culturally repatriated.

The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization turned to David Henry Hwang, the author of *M. Butterfly*, the play about an American diplomat who's no idea what he's getting into bed with. And Mr. Hwang has done something of almost ingenious simplicity: He's taken the two jokes of the original—the over-authentic and the over-assimilated—and merely transferred them from their domestic setting to a showbiz one. We're still in San Francisco's Chinatown four decades ago, but the old conflicts are now played out as a showbusiness fable. On Grant Avenue, Master Wang's Golden Pearl Opera House is dying until his son Wang Ta hits on the idea of remodelling it into the Club Chop Suey—Chinese chorines with fans, parasols in the exotic cocktails, just another stop on the bamboo circuit, as they used to call it. In the old *Flower Drum*, the characters were stereotypes; in the new *Flower Drum*, the characters are selling stereotypes to the white man. Thus, Master Wang becomes Uncle Sammy Fong, emcee, gagmeister and lounge crooner. As someone says, "If our ancestors could see us now, they'd die."

Wang Ta, meanwhile, is torn between the new and the old, between flashy purpose gal Linda Low and the demure orphan Mei Li (played by Lea Salonga, who had more to work with in *Miss Saigon*). She is no longer a mail-order bride but instead the child of a dissident father and opera-singing mother both murdered by the Maoist state.

You'll be relieved to hear that love finds a way and that the finale is a grand double-wedding, though not before we learn that "two Wongs don't make a white." If 1958 is a foreign country to us, Hwang has returned us to the 1920s, when Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse found themselves working on a play called *The Rose of China*. As they subsequently advised aspiring authors: "Have nothing to do with anything with a title like *The Rose of China* or *The Willow Pattern Plate* or *The Siren of Shanghai* or *Me Velly Solly*—in fact, avoid Chinese plays altogether. Much misery may thus be averted. What happens when you write a Chinese play is that before you know where you are your heroine has gone cute on you, adding just that touch of glucose to the part which renders it unsuitable for human consumption. She twitters through the evening saying, 'Me Plum Blossom. Me good girl. Me love Chlistian God very much.'"

Lea Salonga is a credit to this tradition. As a typical Hwangian line of dialogue puts it, "Whoever invented the phrase 'slow boat to China,' never met you." The orphaned-by-Mao routine, instead of making *Flower Drum* more vivid and poignant, seems no more than a straightforwardly cynical up-

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date of the conventions outlined by Bolton and Wodehouse: "Without referring to the script, a thing they are naturally reluctant to do, the authors cannot say after this length of time whether or not the heroine of *The Rose of China* turned out in the end to be the daughter of an American missionary, kidnapped by Chinese bandits in her infancy, but it would seem virtually certain that she did. All heroines of Chinese plays turn out in the end to be the daughters of American missionaries, kidnapped by Chinese bandits in their infancy. There is no reason to suppose that in this instance there would have been any deviation from the straight party line."

If David Henry Hwang were not Asian-American, I'd bet there'd be pickets outside the theater. But he is so there aren't. And God bless him: African-American authors peddle African-American stereotypes, gay authors peddle gay stereotypes; it's a credit to our multicultural diversity that Hwang now gets to do the slow-boat-to-China cracks they'd have previously brought in a white guy for.

If the new *Flower Drum Song* has a message, it's summed up in what's now the show's big nightclub novelty number, "Chop Suey," performed by leggy showgirls wearing giant take-out cartons accompanied by chopsticks. This sounds more fun on paper than it is in execution, mainly because Hwang and Robert Longbottom (director/choreographer) never settle on quite how much ironic distance they want to maintain. "Chop Suey" is, as Hammerstein puts it, "sour and honeydewy" and that's the line the show tries to walk, between buoyant cornball immigrant humor and the vicissitudes of life that drive it. So, even as his dialogue and characters remain relentlessly hokey, Hwang feels obligated to freight the songs with the burthens of history: "A Hundred Million Miracles," the standard R&H hope anthem ("You'll Never Walk Alone," "Climb Ev'ry Mountain"), now accompanies a prologue in which a vast tide of boat people flees the People's Republic. The unironic hymn of immigrant optimism "I Am Going To Like It Here" is reprised by downtrodden masses in a stateside fortune-cookie factory.

The flaw in this method is that, by using the score as modular furniture to be reshuffled at will, the show points up the formulaic nature of the R&H songs. They fit the new situations Hwang has devised for them, but not well enough so that they seem natural and organic: instead, by the time they've been moved hither and yon, they come out sounding 1950s Broadway generic. The boys only really stretched themselves on "I Am Going To Like It Here," Hammerstein's formal, pseudo-Oriental poem, and its beauty is severely obstructed by being interrupted with dialogue and some distracting stage business.

The all-Asian cast is solid and endearing. Sandra Allen (as Linda) wrests "I Enjoy Being A Girl" back from four decades of camp and does it so engagingly you wonder why Hwang's script shunts her out of sight for the rest of the show. Lea Salonga does terrible things to "Love, Look Away" and destroys the delicate majesty of Rodgers's melody (Marilyn Horne sang it in the movie). A gloomy *Oklahoma!*, an unfunny *Boys From Syracuse*, a kitsch *Flower Drum Song*: even Rodgers' many enemies would not wish him a centenary year like this.

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Dance

Fight club

by Laura Jacobs

Twyla Tharp has been choreographing dances for almost forty years, and by this time she should be a mature artist, yet she is not. If your subjects are aggression and apocalypse, how much can you mature? The filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, who made a career of cool doomed odysseys, antic and antisocial destructions, what did he end with? *Eyes Wide Shut*, a last film in which he saw and said nothing, despite the fact that it was based on a story by the Viennese writer Arthur Schnitzler, seer into souls. In a film about the subtleties of desire inside and outside of marriage, Kubrick came up empty. But then, when you do aggression-apocalypse you tend to get machismo-misogyny for free. Has Norman Mailer ever written a mature novel? Sam Shepard a mature play? In Kubrick women are dolly-girls or just not there; in Mailer they're bimbos and bitches. This sounds a lot like Tharp. What begins as a dynamic fact of life—the might of masculine energy, its will to power—becomes the only high worth having, a groove on existential extremes. Why question the high? It's simpler, more aesthetically liberating, not to.

Twyla Tharp has a new work on Broadway called *Movin' Out*, a show about Vietnam set to old songs by Billy Joel. The cast consists of three men who are teenage buddies, the two women who are their girlfriends, and a chorus, or rather, corps de ballet, that fills the other roles. Like Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, the erotic update on Tchaikovsky's ballet that stormed Broadway four years ago, there is no spoken language in *Movin' Out*. Billy Joel's rock ballads are organized to give us time and place, a musical panorama that spans the late sixties to the early eighties. It's up to Tharp to tell the story in dancing and to make that dancing theater. What she comes up with is *Deuce Coupe* meets *The Deer Hunter*. Eddie and Brenda and Tony and Judy and James graduate from high school, the boys ship to Nam, the girls wait or wander, James dies, Judy cries, the boys return wrecks, everybody finds closure—all this in Tharp's signature style: phallocentric, hyperactive, hostile.

If you were to divide Tharp's art into periods, change would be loaded at the front. You'd have (1) Angry Young Woman—the severe and monotonal dances Tharp did with women very early on; (2) Androgyny—men are admitted into the company and in the process gender boundaries, all boundaries, blur and Tharp's slippery style is born; (3) Angry Young Man—in 1973 Tharp choreographs *Deuce Coupe* to Beach Boys music for the Joffrey Ballet and discovers her inner teenage boy.

There was always an element of mockery to Tharp. Wearing a mop-top Beatles haircut, she built her dance style on a whole array of turned-out teenage antagonisms—moves that looked like adolescent fidgets, twitches, and sneers, "so what" shrugs, and "I dunno" double takes. When Tharp

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danced solos, it was often as if she were wearing an invisible set of headphones, or was just ignoring the music, dancing to her own zoned-out drummer. She stuck wiggles and squiggles on steps—a kind of coloring outside the lines—and loved to suddenly spaz in double- or triple-time, a musical impertinence that signaled her impatience with the status quo. And she choreographed in a bumptious stream of consciousness—a little Abbott and Costello, a little late Joyce, a fine line between hyperarticulate and just plain hyper.

Within the context of classical dance, Tharp's tactics and antagonisms cut deeper. Audiences took them in good humor, the way one accepts snotty cracks from stand-up comics. Tharp was turned on by arrogant energy, performance *in extremis*, and when, in 1976, at American Ballet Theatre, she got to draft off Mikhail Baryshnikov in *Push Comes To Shove*, she never looked back. Balanchine's "ballet is woman" be damned. Tharp was one of the boys, and her dances revolved around guy after guy—Baryshnikov then Kevin O'Day then Julio Bocca then Angel Corella then John Selya. She worked boxing, aerobics, break-dancing into her ballets, and in *Men's Piece* (1992) summed it up in a cri de coeur: "Who wanted to be a girl, anyway?"

Tharp has always had big ambitions, though I'm not sure when she got the idea she could tell a story. Abstraction is her sandbox, the arena of her Charles Atlas kick fests. Indeed, her most self-consciously classical ballets (usually set to stern old masters, very contrapuntal), with their swimmy symmetries and stuck-there posture, sometimes look like sand castles when the tide's come in, shape dissolving right before your eyes. Tharp likes to fight the elements, fight the music, fight the world. She's always been better as an "action" choreographer, sliding, flinging, slapping, dripping, driving dancers across the stage solo, in twos, in groups. She gives in to lulls and lyric idylls only to raise the sword once more—a dynamic we see endlessly in her duets, Apache dances in which couples exhaust themselves in domestic battle, only to recharge and battle again. But a story? When Tharp did a narrative ballet for ABT called *Everlast*, the plot was puerile—something about a boxer and an ingenue—and the expense of the production nearly broke the company (when Tharp wants money she has a way of getting it).

The overture to *Movin' Out* is the song "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me," which could be words from Tharp's mouth. And if we miss the reference to that first hit, *Deuce Coupe*, a dusty red convertible wheels onstage to remind us (it's totemic, like the obelisk in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*). The characters announce themselves like dancers in "Hullabaloo"—Mousketeers all grown up and doin' the frug. As Eddie, John Selya in jeans greets us with a spate of delighted pelvic thrusts; Elizabeth Parkinson's Brenda shimmies onto the stage as if out of a go-go cage. Keith Roberts's Tony is Italian beef, Benjamin G. Bowman's James a modest John Boy (of course he dies), and Ashley Tuttle as Judy is his gumdrop of a girlfriend, pink and a little sticky. The band inhabits a high-tech catwalk above the action, blasting out Billy Joel oldies-but-goodies that are sung in a Joel-esque voice by Michael Cavanaugh.

In the program, Tharp credits her son Jesse Huot "for having the idea for this show in the first place," and one can see that on paper it probably looked like a good idea, a return to her roots. She'd choreographed the movie *Hair* in 1978, she collaborated with David Byrne on *The Catherine Wheel* in 1981, and come on, Mom, look how well this retro stuff does on Broadway—*Grease, Mamma Mia, Hairspray*—if anyone should be cashing in, you should. And why shouldn't Tharp marshal her forces and have a hit?

The problem is, when it comes to constructing characters she hasn't any forces to marshal. In one little dream ballet, Agnes de Mille could give us character on the couch, the vanities and fears, the catch of longing, the glint of a second, third, thought.

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Jerome Robbins could do it too, only glossier, snazzier. Tharp has never been able to do this. It's too small, too still, too close, too warm, too woman. It's just not her macho m.o. And while those choreographers worked in other vernaculars, Tharp does not. One cannot imagine her dropping her tics and schticks to make dances for Tuptim. She has one vernacular: Tharp. Take it or leave it. So Eddie and Tony and James get a lot of whipping turns and judo leaps, and also that vaudeville-patter-camaraderie that Tharp trots out in the same cheapo way Woody Allen, when he needs a laugh or an answer, trots out clips of The Marx Brothers. As for Brenda and Judy, the beauty and the goody-good, they're so stock you could blow the dust off them. In almost forty years, Tharp still hasn't learned how to show us a female face.

If the characters are cardboard, then stagecraft could make the difference—all those decades in the theater should count for something. But in the few moments when a choreographic vision kicks in, *Movin' Out* doesn't look like Tharp at all, it looks like Paul Taylor, whose company Tharp danced in before she set out on her own. *Sunset*, *Company B*, one feels both of these Taylor masterpieces—evocations of war and what it does to love—sitting on Tharp's shoulders. In fact, the use of men in silhouette in a dance of mourning, or the way the corps is used in frieze patterns (very unTharp) to fill the stage and give battle action ballast, these moments look lifted. It isn't pretty, Tharp taking from Taylor this late in the day. Then again, Taylor would have chosen only five or six songs, would have concentrated in 25 minutes what Tharp has forced into and strung out for 120. He would not have betrayed songs by making them move in narrative directions they don't want to go or carry heavier emotional baggage then they can bear, as Tharp does with "She's Got A Way" and "Pressure." And he wouldn't have asked Ashley Tuttle to fake cry like a bad soap opera actress. He would have given her dignity in loss. In a dance.

Movin' Out is as dated as an old yearbook, and as square—which is amazing from Tharp, the eternal tough. In the first section, with high school over and before the boys are drafted, it's *American Graffiti* does "American Bandstand." In the war scenes, *Full Metal Jacket* morphs into *Miss Saigon*. When dead soldiers rise to do a ghost dance (a shameless gimmick), it's *The Night of the Living Dead* meets "Thriller." How faux is this show? When one of the songs ends with James blown away, bloody, twitching on the floor in a full-body death rattle, the audience applauds, because it's the end of the song and because it's such virtuoso twitching. The crowd's hip to Tharp. *Movin' Out* is like MTV. You watch it with eyes wide shut.

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Art

Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

I was one of those people unselfconsciously entranced by the Modern's 1993 Robert Ryman retrospective. Yes, its extremism was almost comical: having restricted his palette to white since the early sixties, he filled the museum's galleries with what seemed like countless monochrome variations, which, in the Minimalist mode, called attention to gestural marks, the materiality of the canvas and surface, the shape of the support, and at times the means by which a work attached to the wall. His microscopy might have entailed more than a little quixotic insanity, but the sonata-like sweep of the show had what I felt to be an undeniable beauty. Still, by its end, he seemed to have wrung that particular sponge dry.

In his latest series, which was on view at PaceWildenstein's Chelsea gallery,[1] Ryman added but a single element, color as underpainting, to his limited arsenal of means. A layer of muted peach pigment seeps out, following the area between the edge of an unprimed canvas and a somewhat smaller top layer of white paint mimicking both shapes, of the support and the peach layer, in *Period* (2002). One could also glimpse the peach hue in the interstices of individual white marks, so that the combination of color around the edge and throughout the primary white area cast a pink glow over the work. In *Exchange* (2002), the top white layer followed more closely the contours of a stratum of maroon that left far more of the raw canvas visible, thereby neatly wedding the two paint layers in an idiosyncratic shape against the unprimed ground. Both layers expanded almost to fill the entire canvas in *Link* (2002)—which was held on the wall by steel fasteners—allowing only the hint of color in a razor-thin strip along the edges of the canvas and in the dot-like spaces between white brushstrokes. All the other paintings represented modulations of these three basic ways of accommodating the two paint layers to the support.

Admittedly, the sensual pleasures to be gained by such minute shifts, as the colored grounds shadow and highlight the white marks, do not overwhelm. And, after some thirty years of Minimalist investigation of fundamentals, the addition of steel fasteners has lost virtually all its significance. They remain now only as decorative elements or, perhaps, as anecdotal allusions to a period of art history. In a surprisingly acute catalogue essay, however, the art historian Yve-Alain Bois makes a convincing case for the intellectual gratification the work can offer. Bois focuses on a particular tradition of "divided" color, wherein artists from the Impressionists through, say, Barnett Newman set out to critique, implicitly or explicitly, the "velvet surface" of Venetian painting by progressively disassembling un-

1 "Robert Ryman: New Paintings" was on view at PaceWildenstein, New York, from October 11 to November 9, 2002.

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derpainting from a top layer of relatively individuated brushstrokes. Ryman, he maintains, stands as the latest exemplar in this particular line of what became a Modernist critique. "The present exhibition," he writes, "is perhaps the first [of Ryman's] to gather canvases in which nothing else is involved but the three essential components of painting since the Renaissance"—support, color, and brushstrokes.

In all likelihood, Bois is probably correct in what he says. What troubles me in such an account, however, is that it entirely ignores how the brand of abstraction practiced by Ryman constitutes a forking-off from one of the fundamental aims of abstraction as it first developed early in the last century—the expression, or recapitulation in paint, of a Platonic mysticism, versions of which were espoused by all of the first abstract artists. By the sixties, the vestiges of such transcendent concerns had almost completely disappeared in the work of younger abstract artists; the project of abstraction was reduced to a mechanical critique, and, in the process, the goal of sensual provocation was seen as secondary at best.

Undoubtedly, artists need to change in order to maintain vitality, and Ryman's addition of hue does constitute an applause-worthy pivot. I, for one, would like to see him go farther, turning his rather arid critique against itself—even, perhaps, by embracing an informed sensuality.

Stylistic change also drove the recent exhibition of early and late abstractions by the Californian artist Elmer Bischoff (1916–1991) at Salander-O'Reilly.[2] Well-known as a leading exponent—along with David Park and Richard Diebenkorn—of the Bay Area Figurative Painters in the fifties and sixties, Bischoff nonetheless began as an abstract artist who returned to abstraction in 1974. Unlike Ryman's pure abstractions, which refer only to the handling of their presented materials, Bischoff's (and Diebenkorn's, for that matter) amount to what one might call transitive abstraction: they are *abstractions* of objects or landscapes.

Under the influence of Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, Bischoff began making abstract works in the late forties, and all of the canvases on view from the early part of his career contain identifiable, or partially identifiable, representational elements. Indeed, a few of these canvases hardly merit the label of abstraction at all. *Rocks* (1950), for instance, depicts a freely rendered hilly landscape in shades of purple, red, black, brown, and dark gray, with passages of highlighting hot orange in counterpoint. *Untitled* (1950) places the swirling, leafy branches of a plant on a yellow table in front of a window or landscape, while *Red and Green* (c. 1948) includes the stripped down features of an African mask or Oceanic sculpture. During this period, Bischoff obviously cast about for a suitable manner. My favorite work, *Untitled* (1948), a delta in violent reds, oranges, and yellows that spreads right, into murkier areas of tans and oranges, recalls Still's ruptured color fields. *#8* (1948) and *Scene With X* (c. 1950) seem to combine Synthetic Cubist organization—sharp facets, schematized objects—with Rothko's early myth-laden symbols. Another untitled canvas, from 1950—in which a yellow plane and a curving, blue-gray promontory surrounding a green semicircle intrude from above on a sea-like field of blue defined on its right side by a yellow-white spit—reminds one of Milton Avery's late landscapes and foreshadows the landscape-based abstractions Diebenkorn began toward the end of the decade. In oil, all of these early works have a convincing presence. Their surfaces tend to bulk and dip with passages of impasto, particularly in areas where one color meets another. Their colors are clear and strong, their compositions tight.

The final abstractions, reportedly begun in 1974 with *#1*, oppose these tendencies in every respect. They retain hints of represen-

2 "Elmer Bischoff: Paintings" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, from October 29 to November 30, 2002.

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tational elements but never resolve into landscape or object. Drawing and lineation come into play, with, for example, the limb-like lines in *#1* and the outlined zigzags and linear crosses in *#25* (1977). The compositions have a more diffuse or entropic quality, and yet the surfaces seem busier, abuzz with incident. By choosing to employ acrylic pigments, often heavily diluted, Bischoff in these canvases attains some of the filmy flatness of a watercolor. Where the earlier abstractions evince a direct connection to the figurative period that followed them, however, this later phase seems more of a departure, and not an especially welcome departure at that.

It takes a masterful hand to create successful abstractions in acrylic, and Bischoff's energies flagged short of the mark. I found the forms, quite frankly, uninteresting, and the compositions wearying: a faint leg here, indeterminate biomorphic shapes there, planes juxtaposed without tension, tonal values that range all over the scale, leading to a sort of spatial chaos. The hash-mark motifs and dry, pastel hues of *#25* appear like parodies of Kandinsky.

Talking about writing, a friend once suggested a useful exercise: figure out what you do well and then do something else. Of course, not all exercises are meant for public consumption. Much as I welcome swerves of style, I think Bischoff would have done better sticking to what he did well.

In the street-level gallery at Salander hung nine recent figurative works by Paul Resika.[3] Excepting one smaller work, they used medium-sized rectangular canvases in both horizontal and vertical formats; seven matched a single faceless woman with broad fields of color representing more or less abstract rooms or landscapes. In one, Resika has given the woman schematic facial features, and, in another, she appears with a second figure. Yellow dominates (although sometimes as orange), establishing crisp contrasts with cooler greens, blues, and purples. In his catalogue essay, John Yau bizarrely characterizes these canvases (in a thoroughly ungrammatical sentence) first as "arcadian" and then as "a place [sic] under pressure." I don't know how to explain the discrepancy, but the almost unmodulated (and thus, not at all like a sunset) planes of bright yellow that structure these works to me suggest something cultivated, sophisticated, and entirely unarcadian. More importantly, these canvases, with their figures in repose—stylized, Matissean women outlined in black, which generally occupy the lower left portion of the canvas, leaving open spaces empty of all but color—are studies in languor, lilting songs of sybaritic ease. To my eye, pressure has nothing to do with them.

Resika courts a tranquil beauty without trepidation, and his advances have paid off in gorgeous—some might say overly gorgeous—couplings of simple figures with abstract settings, conjunctions that glory in the immediate joys of color. If Ryman represents the nth degree of tamped-down sensuality, Resika at the other end of the scale, is a reveler in the erotic productions of the senses. In *Sisters* (2002), two nude women, one in red-orange lying back on a couch with her arm behind her head, the other in a darker orange sitting hunched on the blue couch's edge, appear in the lower left. Behind them, a warm red and orange tree trunk divides the space into two unequal sections: on the left, yellow shading slightly into a greener yellow; on the right, a tree branch formed by an orange line twinned with a red one breaks into a green rectangle. A thin brownish band along the bottom edge, a deck perhaps, pushes the background into shallow recession. A bouquet of flowers in a vase on a square table sits below the tree, to the right of the figures. Not arcadian, but balanced and still.

I suppose the worst one could say of these lovely paintings is that it is well-nigh impossible to stand before them and not think of Matisse. The languid air, the treat-

3 "Paul Resika: Paintings" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, from October 29 to November 30, 2002.

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ment of the figures, and the post-Fauvist color all demand comparison with that master. That said, one of the chief benefits of such easeful scenes is that they evince no anxiety of influence; they have none of the aggressive posture toward past art that one might find in Ryman's abstractions or even in Bischoff's implicit repudiation of his earlier work.

Anxiety runs like an undertow through much "cutting-edge" photography these days. The oversized images—often in light boxes, at times digitally altered—of the reigning Germans, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, and Thomas Ruff, et al., reverse the long-held assumption that painting must somehow compete with photography. I encounter few instances of painting disturbed by photography, and almost none where painting inclines to address its formal problems to its younger cousin. On the contrary, photographers today are seen nervously trying to emulate painting. As in the nineteenth century, they resort to frozen tableaux; they enlarge their images to the size of barn doors, emphasizing their stasis. With digital altering, they all but eradicate photographic realism, and introduce a more painterly, imaginative aspect. The light boxes heighten and abstract their colors. Why concern themselves with painting? Because, as is the case with all high-tech art, photography has been superceded to a degree by newer media: it now stands sandwiched by painting on the one side and film and video on the other.

Of all these new-breed photographers, the Canadian Jeff Wall is, in my opinion, the most accomplished. And his accomplishment has everything to do with the fact that he alone among the photographers working in this large, light-box vein acknowledges his engagement with painting. The eight generally outstanding new works that hung at the Marian Goodman Gallery[4] explored his two primary modes: tableau and "near documentary." The latter mode, represented by four color transparencies in light boxes and three black and white images (all very large), Wall explains as "pictures whose subjects were suggested by my direct experience, and ones in which I tried to recollect that experience as precisely as I could, and to reconstruct and represent it precisely and accurately. Although the pictures with figures are done with the collaboration of the people who appear in them. . . . In some way they claim to be a plausible account of, or a report on, what the events depicted are like, or were like, when they passed without being photographed."

A woman runs from a campsite set amid the densely interlaced lines of bare branches in *Forest* (2001), one of the black and white images. Hardly visible, a man stands hidden amongst the trees, in the area toward which the woman is running. The image evinces great technical facility—every line and dead leaf remains in focus, from the extreme foreground to the far depths. With its hint of menace, the story the scene alludes to is the only one of the seven that holds any particular interest, although this in no way diminishes the power of the other images. And, by zeroing in on the branches rather than the action, Wall apparently wants to evoke a sense of drawn lines. Such allusions to drawing can also be found in the bound stacks of kindling in *Cuttings* (2001), a color image, in the sidewalk scratchings in *Overpass* (2001), also in color, and in the patterns of cut trunks in the black and white *Logs* (2002). *Night* (200), a extraordinary black and white study in tonality, depicts a group of vagrants sleeping under a bridge by the side of a huge puddle, which takes up most of the photograph's bottom half and reflects all its elements—the arch and railing of the bridge, the marked-up wall (yet another allusion to painting or drawing) beneath the bridge—with dark clarity.

By contrast, the one tableau, *After the Invisible Man By Ralph Ellison, the Preface* (1999–2000), a scene, in color, of a black

4 "Jeff Wall: New Work" was on view at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York from September 20 to November 2, 2002.

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man sitting in a cluttered Harlem apartment under 1,369 light bulbs, some lit, hanging down from the ceiling, feels too staged, an unnecessary illustration. Working like a photographer, with, as it were, the scene directly before him, albeit one copied from a text, he is overly limited, unable to focus on stray details. Ironically, Wall seems to create his most comely and believable photographs when he functions like a studio painter, recollecting scenes from memory tempered by imagination.

Exhibition note

"Masterpieces of European Painting from the Toledo Museum of Art" at The Frick Collection, New York. October 29–January 5, 2003

Were one to stroll through The Frick Collection, bedazzled by its many masterpieces and paying only nominal attention to the requisite wall labels, one might mistake the twelve paintings included in the exhibition "Masterpieces of European Painting from the Toledo Museum of Art" as part of the Frick's permanent collection. Walking in to it is, in fact, a transition so seamless it's no transition at all. Certainly, the fineness of the works from Toledo is in keeping with what we've come to expect from the Frick. Colin B. Bailey, Chief Curator at the Frick, and Lawrence W. Nichols, Curator of European Painting and Sculpture before 1900 at the Toledo Museum, have organized the exhibition with an eye toward locating correspondences between the Toledo paintings and those in the Frick's collection. We can, for example, compare Toledo's *Syndics of the Amsterdam Goldsmiths Guild*, a 1627 canvas by the Dutch painter Thomas de Keyser, with Frick mainstays by Rembrandt and Frans Hals in an adjoining gallery. This not only affords an opportunity to weigh distinctions of a high artistic order, but it also affords New Yorkers an opportunity to acquaint themselves with treasures whose regular home lies in far-off Ohio.

A New Yorker could congratulate the Toledo Museum on a group of pictures worthy of the Frick, were he unafraid of revealing his chauvinism. Indeed, the converse sentiment is true: the Frick has proven itself worthy of Ohio's finest. Leafing through a catalogue of the Toledo Museum's permanent collection, one is quick to realize that *Masterpieces of European Painting* is the proverbial tip of the museum's iceberg. The Toledo Museum has in its collection canvases by Hans Holbein the Younger, Rembrandt, Rubens, Poussin, and Fantin-Latour that, judging from the reproductions, could have been substituted with those in the current exhibition with no concomitant diminution in quality. Having said that, Bailey and Nichols have made their choices with a discernment that is sure, sharp, and, alas, increasingly rare. Theirs is a concentrated and thrilling show. They are to be applauded for having made the hard decisions.

The Toledo Museum's chief benefactor was Edward Drummond Libbey (1854–1925), an industrialist whose fortune was made in glassware. Along with a group of similarly minded citizens, Libbey established the museum in 1901 with the needs of the Toledo community in mind. It was his belief that an art museum should "be a factor and an inspiration for all those things which better civilization and elevate mankind"—*all* of mankind one should note. George Stevens, the museum's first director, reiterated the democratic nature of Libbey's vision, stating that the institution's goal was to "remove from the minds of the people that [it] is an ultra-exclusive association, or an expensive luxury. It is neither one nor the other. It has something to give that all the people want and we want them all with us." Yet Libbey and his cohorts were unwilling to sacrifice quality for the sake of populism—their outreach to "the people" was predicated on respect, not condescension. Upon his death in 1925, Libbey left the Toledo Museum his own collection—which included pictures by Rembrandt, Turner, and Constable—as well as funding to ensure

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the growth of the museum's collection. From the evidence on display at the Frick, Libbey's bequest has been put to superlative use.

Masterpieces of European Painting traverses almost 500 years of history, from fifteenth-century Florence to nineteenth-century Paris or, to be more precise, nearby Chantilly where Paul Cézanne painted for five months in 1888. Besides de Keyser and Cézanne, the other artists featured are Jacopo Bassano, Francesco Primaticcio, El Greco, François Boucher, Thomas Gainsborough, Antoine-Jean Gros, Gustave Courbet, Camille Pissarro and James-Jacques-Joseph Tissot. The high point of the exhibition is provided by the Florentine Piero di Cosimo (1462–1521). His *Adoration of the Child* (c. 1495–1500), a portrayal of the Virgin praying before the infant Jesus, has been given emphasis at the Frick through the clarity of its lighting, the centrality of its location and the concordance between the oval gallery in which it is displayed, and its tondo format. As striking a picture as *The Adoration of the Child* is, it can't, I think, be called a masterpiece: it lacks an overall cohesiveness, engaging us more in its parts than in the whole. Still, what parts! The vegetation at the bottom left of the panel is a marvel of meticulous execution; the triangular snippet of orange drapery revealed amongst Mary's blue and red garments reveals an astute and not unwitty pictorial technician; the hands of the Virgin, scaled larger than the rest of the figure and floating all-but-imperceptibly above the surface of the canvas, have the durability of carved marble and the tenderness of living flesh.

The cool serenity of di Cosimo's painting is in contrast to the earthiness of de Keyser's aforementioned group portrait. De Keyser's painterly virtuosity will have museum-goers gaping in disbelief—particularly stunning is his rendering of fabric—but more impressive is the thoroughness with which he captures the individuality of each of the four men pictured. Going from left to right, we have apprehensive yet compliant, impatient and short tempered, shrewd but good humored and, finally, forbearing and kind. Equally vivid are the two lambs who know more than they're letting on at the bottom right of Bassano's *Flight into Egypt* (c. 1542) and the disfavor shown to us by the stately woman in Tissot's *London Visitors* (1874). Of the twelve paintings on view, only Primaticcio's *Ulysses and Penelope* (c. 1560) stops short of taking our breath away; it's more a sublime curiosity than an undeniable masterwork. Yet even Gustave Courbet, a painter whose great talent was consistently foiled by a greater ego, pulls off a winner or, at least, most of a winner with the floral still life that dominates *The Trellis* (1862). This listing gives but partial credit to the splendors of *Masterpieces of European Painting*. New Yorkers with a keen appreciation for painting won't need to have their arms twisted in order to discover them on their own initiative.

—Mario Naves

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

When she enters a stage—as she did at Carnegie Hall—Anne-Sophie Mutter sort of slinks, looking smashing. You may think it crass to mention this, and even crasser to *begin* with it. But let's not kid ourselves: Glamour has always been a big part of A-SM's marketing. No one from Team Mutter could possibly object.

The violinist appeared for a recital dubbed "Song and Dance." This was something of a pops recital, beginning with the Fauré Sonata, but continuing with three Brahms Hungarian Dances, the Suite from *Porgy and Bess*, and a few ditties by Kreisler, before concluding with a three-movement work written for Mutter by her now-husband, André Previn. The program may have been lightish, but it was perfectly appetizing, and there was no reason it couldn't have been a success. In fact, well played, it would have been a capital evening.

It certainly started out well: Mutter was splendid in the first movement of the Fauré. She was intimate and engaging, making use of understatement. She displayed a beautiful sense of breathing, and she had a connectedness about her playing—one thought relating to the other. Her sound is all her own, thin-ribboned and slightly grainy, and capable of adapting to most any musical situation. One can never rest easy with Mutter's intonation—but in this opening Allegro, she was a model of Impressionistic/Romantic violin playing.

The second movement, Andante, was intelligent and effective, and if the third—Allegro vivo—was a little scratchy and "picky," it was defensible. The concluding movement, however, was thoroughly mediocre. Mutter lost that sense of connectedness and became listless. This is a nagging Mutter trait.

Her pianist, as usual in these recitals, was Lambert Orkis, who was adequate and largely supportive, but seldom assertive (meaning, helpfully assertive). As a pianist, he has the common tendency of rushing in difficult passages. Why people do this is a mystery, but it is a longstanding fact.

The three Brahms Hungarian Dances were startlingly bad—startling in many respects. By rights, this music is in Mutter's blood, but her renditions were feckless, gutless, and astonishingly uncharacteristic. Past the point of individuality, they were bizarre. Everything was colossally distorted, bent and twisted out of shape. It was all one could do not to ask, "Is she on drugs?" In one of these Dances, her rhythmic fluctuations were so severe and nonsensical that one thought of a record, coming in and out at different speeds, owing to a balky turntable—perhaps one with a short. And her intonation completely left her. It was hard to tell that we were listening to the same woman who'd begun the Fauré.

Mutter has long been inconsistent; but she has become worryingly more so. Often, she plays like Cecilia Bartoli sings (alarmingly), and she can be as loopy, interpretively, as the latter-day Kathleen Battle.

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After intermission, Mutter assayed the Gershwin Suite, the one fashioned by that great admirer of the composer's, Jascha Heifetz. A German violinist doing Gershwin? Sure—after all, Heifetz, a Russian (though a proud American citizen), did so. And if Mutter's countryman Thomas Quasthoff can sing "Ol' Man River" and spirituals, certainly she can play Gershwin.

But not like this, she shouldn't. Again, eccentricity—unmusical eccentricity—held sway. She drowned in portamento, sliding all over the place, vulgarly. In pitch, she became flatter and flatter: You might have been listening to Frederica von Stade, on her worst night. A great many phrases were un-*Porgy*-like, and un-Gershwin-like. Key moments like the "now and forever" in "Bess, You Is . . ." were utterly lost. Mutter seemed never to have heard the duet. She seemed not to have heard "It Ain't Necessarily So" either. Her tempo was so slow, she had no chance of sustaining it.

She played this Gershwin not as though she had just arrived from Germany—knowing nothing about America—but as though she had just arrived from Neptune. Incidentally, her husband is one of the best Gershwin interpreters in the world. Ever, really.

But surely she must have played *Fritz Kreisler* in authentic, or at least plausible, fashion? Not really. Her playing was a shame. Birthplace, as is so often the case, counted for little. For Kreisler today, one does well to turn to Joshua Bell, reared in the Indiana cornfields (although taught by Josef Gingold). Mutter was, again, vulgar, distorted, and super-slidey. Lambert Orkis continued too unobtrusive. He could have given these pieces more shape, some structure—backbone. He sort of let Mutter disintegrate, when it was incumbent on him to intervene.

The Previn piece—composed in 1997—is called *Tango, Song, and Dance*. It is both clever and charming. It is thoroughly Previnesque, too, which is to say that it's a *little* pastichey and derivative (although a kinder—and more appropriate—word would be "borrow-y"). Its crown and joy is its second movement, the "Song," which is beautiful. One hears in it—as in other parts of the work—some of the composer's opera, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The concluding Dance is jazz-fueled and kicky.

Mutter did well here—especially considering the foregoing—and as she exited, she gave a sweet, wifely wave to Previn, sitting in a box. Quite rightly, she repeated the Song as an encore. But, judging from recent appearances, there seems to be something amiss in this violinist. Given the abundance of excellent young violinists today—Vengerov, Hahn, Midori, Bell, Chang—she must get her act together or be left behind. No matter how pretty she is.

Comparisons are odorous, Shakespeare said—but then, a lot of music criticism reeks. It wasn't the Guarneri String Quartet's fault that they performed in New York the night after the Brentano String Quartet; but they were put at a distinct disadvantage. The Brentano is only ten years old, and they gave a brilliant and stirring concert in the Weill Recital Hall (which is part of the Carnegie complex). More than a few people think they are—even now—the top string quartet in the world.

The Guarneri is a much older group and is still a much bigger name: but, when they appeared in the auditorium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they seemed tired, uninspired, and rather yesterday's news. Opening the concert was Haydn's String Quartet in C, Op. 54, No. 2. This is an unusual quartet from that Classical master in that it begins with a Vivace and ends with an Adagio. The first of the Guarneri's problems was its sound: It was simply unpleasant, rough and careless. Sound isn't everything, of course, but it's not nothing.

The performance, at its best, was routine. Missing were the composer's famous humor and gaiety. The Guarneri played stiffly and unlyrically, and they were often out of tune. In the later movements, the playing wasn't damnable, but neither was it polished or admirable. It was afflicted with that most

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dreaded of qualities: okayness. This opus may not be Haydn's most ingenious creation, but you can do a lot more with it than the Guarneri did.

Next came Kodály's String Quartet No. 2, Op. 10—a work in which beauty is even less important, which was fortunate. The first movement (Allegro) was intelligently done, with some strong playing from the Guarneri's first violinist, Arnold Steinhardt (except for a lamentably shaky final note). And the closing section—Allegro giocoso—had some of the "giocoso" missing from the Haydn. The playing overall was somewhat subdued, but one might also call it mature. Kodály's folk elements were a bit undersold—but at least they weren't obnoxious.

The second half of the concert was given over to another C-major quartet, that by Beethoven, Op. 9, No. 3. Back again was an anemic, scratchy sound, and the opening movement had little of the composer's joy or spirit. At this point, one must see through the playing to soak up the work. This is what one should do at any concert, if I may pause for a little (unasked for) advice: If you don't care for the performance, listen only to the music (apart from the rendition of it); if you happen not to care for the music, concentrate on the performance. Ideally, of course, no such choice has to be made.

Beethoven's second movement—Andante con moto, quasi allegretto—saw some improvement, with a nice, lively contribution from the cellist, Peter Wiley. If this movement wasn't heartfelt or probing, it was at least respectful and respectable. The following Menuetto actually had a smile—some warmth and generosity. It also reminded us of how much Beethoven loved C major, and how many moods he could convey in it.

Finally there comes a fugue, which the Guarneri executed deftly. One could see, at last, how they made their reputation. This was first-rate playing, with drive, expertise, and commitment. But the wait had been long.

Who is the greatest clarinetist in the world? This is probably not a question you've given much thought to, but I will volunteer an answer: David Shifrin. He certainly receives many votes, distinguished as Richard Stoltzman, Sabine Meyer, and several others are. Shifrin is also the artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, a successful and invaluable endeavor. At one of the Society's recent concerts, Shifrin was featured in a new concerto, by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

This is one of those pieces that "took a turn" after September 11. Over the last year or so, we've read many times, when attending a premiere: "The piece was meant to be this, but after 9/11, it was impossible to continue in that vein, so it had to take a turn, reflecting what had happened." September 11 has generated a lot of music—or has worked its way into a lot of music—not very much of it good.

Zwilich has made two versions of her clarinet concerto, one for chamber ensemble and one for orchestra. Not long after this Chamber Society concert, David Shifrin premiered the latter version with the Buffalo Philharmonic.

He is, indeed, a wondrous instrumentalist, and musician, and he had ample chance to prove it in the Zwilich. The concerto starts with zing: It is jazzy, riffy, propulsive, improvisatory. Everyone, it seems, gets jazz-minded when writing a clarinet concerto (though not Mozart). Pete Fountain would have fun in Zwilich's first movement. As for Shifrin, he is the complete clarinetist: the complete woodwind player, the complete wind player. He draws from his instrument a gorgeous tone, and he can alter that tone as required. His virtuosity is absolute. And his range—from bottom to top—has a wholeness, a unity. These aren't separate registers, but one "voice." Any singer would kill for that. Singers would kill for Shifrin's breathing capacity, too. That capacity, as Shifrin demonstrated in the second movement of this work, is almost superhuman.

It is in that second movement that the concerto takes its turn—a very abrupt one.

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This is the only movement that has a title or any marking at all: "Elegy: September 11." There is a feeling of kaddish about this section, and the clarinet lends a hint of the klezmer. It goes without saying that this music is sincerely meant: but to my ears, it came off as a little hokey—a little like film and television music. I thought of one of those after-school specials, when music comes on that's supposed to make you feel sad. For me, this was a little too self-conscious to be truly affecting. In all likelihood, you can't consciously write about tragedy; it simply has to come.

On top of which, that contrast between the first and second movements seems too drastic to be credible (although, it is true, those planes came out of the blue, on a beautiful day). To return to the performance, Shifrin effected, at the end of the second movement, a jaw-dropping diminuendo.

The third movement revives a peppiness, and it continues to exploit the clarinet nicely. And in the fourth and final movement, we are back again in elegy mode, though this time with more sweetness and resignation. In my eyes—and, again, I keep qualifying these things, because the matter is so personal—this concerto does not succeed as commemoration. There is such a thing, we've discovered, as tragedy kitsch. We may have to accept that criminal calamities like 9/11 are inexpressible in music. And if you have to tell someone what a piece is "about" . . .

It wasn't quite winter, but José van Dam visited Alice Tully Hall for Schubert's *Winterreise*. Actually, this was the first of two recitals given by the famed Belgian bass-baritone, the other being all-Schumann (including the *Dichterliebe*). Van Dam is—if I may—in the winter of his career. He is an old vocal warrior who has lived a lifetime with *Winterreise*, among other important works, and he has performed it the world over many times. It shows. Experience and wisdom count.

But so does voice, a little bit—and van Dam sounds like an old man. That may seem rude and harsh, but it's certainly not meant to be. As it is appropriate for a woman, or a man, to look his age, it's appropriate for a singer to sound his age. Van Dam's instrument is now husky and ragged, though it has resources—resources that van Dam knows how to employ. And if the voice is gone, or going, a singer must depend all the more on his wiles: musical wiles. This, van Dam does.

Yes, a singer in later years must rely more than ever on characterization and insight—but there is the danger of overdoing it, in compensation. This is an affliction of many a singer with gray hair: over-artistry, let's call it. But van Dam avoids it, which is infinitely to his credit.

In every one of the songs making up this cycle, van Dam touched the core. His technique is in superb shape. He seems to have acquired it early, which is standing him in good stead now. His intonation, for example, was rock-solid. Through catarrh and scratching and wear and everything else, that intonation came through. His German is clear and correct. And his range should be anyone's envy. In *Winterreise*, he sang almost two octaves, from a low G to a high F. He evinced zero strain.

As happens in good *Winterreises*, a mesmerizing effect soon took over. One forgot the voice—the initial adjusting to the voice; one heard not the voice, but the singing. Besides which, that voice grew on one. In addition, van Dam demonstrated a fine sense of rhythm—of pulse—with no tempos intolerably slow. That's another affliction, or danger, for the old: slowness of tempo, as a stand-in for profundity. Van Dam unified these two dozen songs, all through. And he used just enough variation of mood, inflection, and so on to avoid monotony. This performance was a feat of stamina, and, more important, of concentration—mental stamina.

The pianist was a Pole named Maciej Pikulski, a fine player with a nice tone and an easy, fluid technique. Sometimes, it's hard to play something so (relatively)

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simple: oom-pah-pahs, or a simple melodic line in the left hand. This takes evenness, composure, and maturity, which Pikulski has.

We will end with a colorful, outsize, thrilling evening: a presentation of Berlioz's *Damnation de Faust* by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. We are coming up on a big Berlioz year, 2003, the bicentennial of the composer's birth. *La Damnation de Faust* is . . . what? An opera? A concert opera? A dramatic oratorio? Whatever it is, it is a rhapsodically Romantic "show," and the Montreal forces milked it for all it's worth.

Mention first must be made of the tenor—the Faust—Michael Schade, described in his bio as a "German-Canadian." He was heard at the beginning of the season in the Beethoven Ninth with the New York Philharmonic. But that gave hardly any indication of what he can do. In the Berlioz, he was fresh-voiced, lyrical, and a joy to listen to. He put one in mind of Fritz Wunderlich—a sentence that is almost never written, and that I, for one, have never had occasion to write, that I can recall. Like Wunderlich, Schade was graceful but powerful, his gleaming, beautiful instrument buttressed by a sure technique, and guided by sure musical instincts. His soft singing was superb, and his high "head voice" astonishing.

The Méphistophélès was a proven young Canadian, John Relyea, who seems more and more like the successor to Samuel Ramey, the veteran American bass whom he resembles in many ways. Relyea is clean, disciplined, and musical. He conveyed his role well, with plenty of menace in the voice, but without mustache-twirling inadvertent comedy.

Equally impressive was the evening's Marguerite, the mezzo-soprano Ruxandra Donose, a Romanian, with the signature qualities of that nation, vocally. They seem to have an endless supply of darkish, wide-ribboned, alluring voices. Donose is not only a singer of considerable beauty but also one of considerable control.

Berlioz's *Faust* requires a very full stage, and the Montreal people went all out, having not only a groaning orchestra and the symphony's chorus, but the Petits Chanteurs de Laval as well. Leading the affair was the French conductor Michel Plasson, most closely associated with Toulouse. (The Montreal Symphony recently lost its longtime conductor, Charles Dutoit, whose high-handedness finally proved too much.) Plasson was extraordinarily vigorous and enthusiastic, seeming to enjoy himself immensely. The orchestra committed itself lustily, and the chorus—obviously well drilled—sang precisely and gloriously.

Vocally, we may not hear a more distinguished program all year. And dramatically, the entire evening was supercharged. It was at times riotous, spilling over with emotion and passion. The whole, undying story was conjured, a living tale.

About midway through this performance, I had one wish, and command, for the Montrealers and their crew: Record.

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The media

They still don't get it

by James Bowman

Although, to judge by what one reads, real levels of literacy continue to decline in America, there is one sense in which we may be said to be a hyperliterate culture. This is in the challenge taken up by an apparently ever-increasing number of self-consciously artful prose stylists to make historical events their own by (as we may say) *writing them up*, and turning them into literature. One of the most striking recent examples is to be found in Martin Amis's book, published last summer, called *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the 20 Million*. For some reason, though he had nothing new to tell us about them, Martin Amis thought that the crimes of Josef Stalin had been insufficiently commemorated by the "several yards of books" that he had read on the subject and so set out to convert the gruesome tale into a Martin Amis-style postmodern novel.

Hence the subtitle, which leads us to a number of ineffably silly and offensive reflections—which do not come near to exhausting the silliness and offensiveness of the book—on why the 20 million victims (putting the total rather low) of Uncle Joe may be regarded as fit subject of mirth while the victims of the Holocaust may not. The less said about this book the better, but it is, I take it, a symptom of a trend. It may have been started by Truman Capote with *In Cold Blood*, and Norman Mailer may have been its most prominent practitioner since, but the *cacoethes scribendi* seems to have spread from eminent novelists to just novelists to, well, would-be novelists currently employed by our finer newspapers or periodicals.

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001, for example, have already produced at least one book of deep thoughts and delicately crafted essays by what *Publishers Weekly* calls "a lineup of literary names," and we can expect a similar treatment of the wars in Afghanistan and (if it happens) Iraq. Obviously, it doesn't take a war or 20 million dead by a tyrant's hand to call forth the talents and best efforts of our most accomplished stylists and cultivators of extravagant metaphors and analogies. Only a dozen or so of corpses will do the trick, or so it seems from the journalistic treatment meted out to "the D.C. sniper"—as he was known before the arrest of John Muhammad and John Lee Malvo revealed him to be a man and a boy.

Here, for instance, is Richard Lambert in *The Times* of London. "For people living in the suburbs of Washington D.C., the sniper has become a terrifying reality. . . . But for the rest of the nation, there is something surreal about the whole story. This is partly because of the nature of the crimes, the only motive of which appears to be to create the maximum amount of confusion and terror. . . . Above all, the unreality of what has been happening comes from when and where these crimes are being committed. Just a few minutes away by helicopter flight

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from the terrorized suburbs, President Bush and his Administration are working on plans to send tens of thousands of young Americans to invade a distant country that most people would be hard-pressed to identify on a map. That grim reality is hard to grapple with, too."

The novelist Patricia Cornwell wrote in *The New York Times* that "One of the many threadbare jokes I used to hear, going back to my earliest days of running around with cops, was that a shooting victim 'died of lead poisoning.' I used to roll my eyes at the stupid joke. But I'm not now. For the first time in my life, I realize it is possible for a people to be poisoned by a single round. One shot, two shots, eleven shots fired by someone with an AK-47 or some other high-powered rifle with a scope rips the life from another of our neighbors and sends the rest of us indoors. . . . Terrorism. Lead poisoning. We watch the stock market implode. Fear creates fear, and the more we fear, the more we create fear until the day will come—and it most certainly will—when we won't need anyone to ruin our lives. We will become perfectly capable of ruining them ourselves."

A grim prospect, I think you'll agree, yet perhaps not so grim as that adumbrated by David Gelernter in the *Wall Street Journal*: "How do you prevent crimes like the D.C. murders? I don't know; but I do know that John Donne claimed in 1624 that no man is an island. And at the time that was no mere theological assertion, it was a fact; but sometime during the twentieth century, it stopped being true. In modern America (and for the last half century at least), many men are islands. The vast majority are harmless; no doubt nearly all are unhappy; a few are potential mass murderers. Citizen murderers of the D.C.-sniper type are drawn from the (in Donne's sense) island population . . . "

Along with the elegiac note, along with the extravagant comparison and the telling paradox, there is commonly included a bit of profound social criticism, just so that we may be sure of getting our money's worth. Thus Tom Shales in the *Washington Post*: "What's shocking is what no longer shocks us. We wake up in the morning now fully expecting to hear of a new tragedy, another heartless and seemingly random killing by a serial sniper terrorizing the Washington area. It is becoming a cruel, grim routine. We may actually, and appallingly, be getting used to it. We're adapting to a new world of fear that began on Sept. 11, 2001."

"One approaches the TV set timidly, with justifiable apprehension and dread," Shales continues, though his colleague Paul Farhi suggests that the reason may be the relentlessly portentous tone of the TV coverage itself:

> It's not just a harrowing, mystifying news story affecting the lives of millions. For the TV networks and stations covering the sniper case, it's also a splendid opportunity to promote the stations and their coverage.
>
> "A sniper on the loose, a nation on edge," says a gravelly CNN voice over video of anchor Wolf Blitzer and other network stars. "Count on CNN to bring you the whole story. Now, more than ever."
>
> "Few clues in a community gripped by fear," trumpets rival Fox News Channel, the network's logo prominent on the screen. "What's next in the sniper case?"

It would of course be unfair and irresponsible to suggest that the media hype actually flattered the snipers into extending their reign of terror, but there could be little doubt that, as the FBI profiler Clint Van Zandt said, "He's playing off the media. He's listening to every law enforcement briefing. For a while they were coming every two hours. That was a tremendously rich source of information. In a perfect world we would put a media cap on this and we would starve him of information." It seems to go without saying that a world in which even so small a degree of media restraint as this were possible could only be a "perfect" one. But Van Zandt himself had experienced the blowback from the media

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coverage when, after he had accused the sniper of "playing God," the police found the Tarot card with the message: "Mr. Policeman, I am God." Van Zandt told Tim Russert: "We are dealing with an interactive terrorist."

But it was doubtless the way in which we are all equal before the media god, and are all eager to take up our assigned roles in its long-running psychodrama, that led to the best postmodern effects. Of these what had to be the *ne plus ultra* came when one of the killers, still at large, angrily accused the police of "incompetence" for putting him on hold or hanging up on him when he called their tip-line. Neither the criminals nor the police appear to have doubted throughout the weeks of fear that it was the primary job of the investigation to listen to these madmen and to submit, where appropriate, the evidences of their madness to the media for analysis. Only then might they be content to be caught. Where the police were slow about doing this, the media and the snipers were quick to unite in protest.

Being afraid was of course the public's part in the show, and the public seemed to play it with a will, at least if the faithfulness of the media in reporting their fear back to them was anything to go by. Fear also gave the media's would-be belletrists the chance to show off their creativity in the quality papers. A report published on the day the killers were caught said that fifty percent of respondents to a *Washington Post* poll confessed to being "very" or "somewhat" frightened of being sniped. This was a significant datum and a news item in itself both because it confirmed that fear was a fitting and appropriate response to the media climate and because it justified the media's reporting of that fear when the appropriate response was made. Only nineteen percent claimed not to be frightened at all.

Didn't these people watch TV? Didn't they know what was expected of them?

By the way, broken down by sex, the results of the poll also showed that sixty percent of women were very or somewhat frightened but that only forty percent of men were. Though women were more likely to have wept over the shootings, both sexes were equally likely (seventy-five percent) to have experienced the emotion of anger. Does this surprise you? Do you feel shocked that ours is still enough of an honor culture that many men feel ashamed to admit to being afraid but few women do? But the *Washington Post*, which sees everything happening on earth from the distant planet of its own multiracial, multicultural, unisex utopia—talk about a perfect world!—made no mention of these familiar facts. It did, however, give us one of the great postmodern moments of the affair when it responded to the first sniper attacks with the headline: "5 Shooting Victims. Reflect Montgomery [County]'s Growing Diversity." Than this it is almost impossible to imagine anything going further in the direction of self-parody.

Yet there was a similar moment in the coverage of the affair by *The New York Times*, which at one point thought it newsworthy to report that, although there was (of course) "no overstating how much this killer or killers has changed their lives . . . for many people, resentment is more focused on the wily sniper than the police who cannot seem to stop him." Just fancy that! People resenting a criminal murderer more than they do the presumptively incompetent officialdom that the sages and philosophers of *The New York Times* have made it their life's work to second-guess. Some people just don't get it.

The media's careful cultivation of fear meant that few if any commentators were so hardy as to suggest to worried parents and spouses and children that it was absurd of them to cancel school sports and other public events because of the possibility of being shot, or to take police advice to walk in a zig-zag pattern if it were necessary to show themselves in public at all. That people were prepared to take risks might have made for more excitement, but the

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media always assume that the acceptable level of risk is zero.

This became evident during the time of the media's brief attempt, cut short only because arrests were made only a day or two later, to create a scandal out of the police's withholding the warning, purporting to come from the snipers, that children were not safe "any place, any time"—as if anyone but a fool ever supposed that complete safety were an option for children—or anyone else—sniper or no sniper. But the essence of the story, from the media point of view, was the scope it gave for exaggeration of the public's fear. This was not a conscious effort of hype so much as it was a structural element in the media constitution, if we can put it that way.

No sooner had the suspects been arrested in the sniper case than another example of this structural tendency turned up in the form of the Hart-Rudman task force on homeland security of the Council on Foreign Relations, which produced an alarming report on all the ways in which incompetent officialdom, insufficiently resented by those who lived in fear of the sniper, was also preparing to fail to forestall the next terrorist attack—which the commission, headed by former senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, confidently promised would take place. Indeed, they had already predicted an attack on the American homeland seven months before the airplanes flew into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and were inclined to accept kudos for their "prescience," even though they had predicted neither the date nor the time nor the place nor the persons involved nor the method. Apart from those details, they had the thing nailed.

They were also not averse to suggesting that if only their voice had been heeded 3,000 Americans needn't have died on September 11, nor who knows how many more in the next attack—about the myriad of possibilities for which they eagerly supplied some of the details missing from their earlier forecast. In the real world, too many warnings are quite as bad as too few. You can't take every precaution. But in the media world, which is also the world of the Council on Foreign Relations' task force, all that matters is being able to point, after the fact, to some more or less ambiguous warning that went unheeded. The commissioners, as much as the media, had a vested interest in stirring up fear. If they were really motivated solely by concern for national security, they would have made their report private and, indeed, secret, since publicizing it could be of benefit only to the terrorists.

The problem is that we are at war, and in war the attitude that security is all-important is a recipe for defeat. As in the case of airport security—or the California jury that awarded a dying smoker $28 billion on the assumption that the tobacco company, by offering a product with a well-known risk attached to it, was guilty of causing her illness—we were again in danger of adopting the media's impossible standard of one-hundred percent security. As a result we lose focus on the real bad guys and instead seek for causes of recrimination among ourselves for any conceivable mistake or lapse that, had it not happened, might have caught the terrorist and prevented him from committing his act of terrorism. Terrorism is called so not because it kills people but because all the people it doesn't kill are expected to panic at the thought that they may be next. This suggests that the only way to defeat terrorism is by a manly refusal to change any habits, or to admit to fear because some pathetic nonentity like John Allen Muhammad, or Mohamed Atta, wants us to as part of a media-aided demonstration to himself that he is not a pathetic nonentity. Of course, only in a perfect world would the press leave off its endless emotion-mongering and join in this noble resistance.

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Verse chronicle

The real language of men

by William Logan

The dreamy, *sotto voce* poems of *Book of My Nights*[1] might lure babies to sleep, or butterflies. They're "simple," "lyrical," "honest"—their graces come with little scare quotes attached, not because Li-Young Lee is ironic but because it's so difficult to believe such sweetness *isn't* ironic. A willed naïveté may be no worse than real naïveté, yet innocence isn't always better than experience. The Babes in the Wood were long ago eaten by bears.

> Li-Young, don't feel lonely
> when you look up
> into great night and find
> yourself the far face peering
> hugely out from between
> a star and a star. All that space
> the nighthawk plunges through,
> homing, all that distance beyond embrace,
> what is it but your own infinity.

It's hard to imagine a poet more romantic in these unromantic times, but being romantic isn't simply a matter of slipping on a Byronic collar and striking a pose. Lee's language derives not directly from Shelley or Keats, but from the slow degradation of romantic diction through the Georgians down to the trivial byways of sixties surrealism. Lee takes W. S. Merwin's animist idiom (almost forensic in its study of stones and bones) and pushes it a lot farther (shoves it over a cliff, on occasion). All he's added are punctuation marks.

The Romantics poured the acid of the personal over the studied impersonal forms of Augustan poetry (you know a real crippled Pope wrote his profoundly frivolous poems, but they sound as if they were cranked out by a mill wheel). The cool detachment of the Augustans seemed old-fashioned when readers found themselves aroused by the intimacy and privacies of romantic speech. It was the difference between listening to a Sunday sermon—and Pope was the wittiest of preachers—and taking a lover. Wordsworth's "real language of men" has been reborn each generation, and as one diction hardens there has usually been a young Romantic ready with a seductive whisper.

The problem with young Romantics is that sometimes they are *themselves* seduced by what they've read—they don't want to write a language lived but one long antique, one that worked for earlier Romantics. When Lee moves his counters across the page—*night* and *moon*, *sleep* and the *stars*, the *woman*, the *dead brother*—you don't think you've been spoken to by the trembling voice of wisdom. You think you've been stranded in the middle of *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

> My eternity shrugs and yawns:
> Let the stars knit and fold

1 *Book of My Nights*, by Li-Young Lee; BOA Editions, 70 pages, $21.95; $12.95 (paper).

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inside their numbered rooms. When night asks
who I am I answer, *Your own*, and am not
lonely.

After such passages (with the grandiosity of a molehill, not a mountain), you need a whiff of smelling salts. There are more poems about God here than in Lee's earlier books, but his real religion requires an airless myth of family—almost no one appears in these poems except blood relations, and they're the vague figures of a psychiatrist's couch, reeking of ancient grief and anger. It's part of that drawing-room claustrophobia that Lee's favorite device is the rhetorical question ("And what's it like?/ Is it a door, and good-bye on either side?/ A window, and eternity on either side?"). When a poet has seventy-five of them in a short book, he's left a lot of questions unanswered.

Some readers will find Lee's hand-me-down feelings (secondhand language always denatures the emotions it carries) as honest as paint; and at times the clean, well-mannered lines carry a suggestive image like the "missing pages/ of the sea" or the "jasmine, its captive fragrance/ rid at last of burial clothes." More often he falls into the moony silliness of a "woman// like a sown ledge of wheat" and the "well/ from which paired hands set out, happy/ to undress a terrifying and abundant yes" (Lee has my nomination for the stuffed-owl anthology of the new century). The beautiful mush of these poems is hard to take. Sentiment slathered on so thickly is always hard to take.

Now the Green Blade Rises[2] is the ominous title of Elizabeth Spires's new book. You see the point, in these poems written after her mother's death (fresh shoots of grass growing from the grave); but the other sense of *blade*, rising only to fall, delayed like the sword of Damocles, lies in grim suspension behind the hope of resurrection. Whitman's point, the Bible's point, was that blades of grass soon fall as well.

The quiet confidence of Spires's poems has not received much attention—she's not one of the loud middlebrow poets of her generation, poets who become poet laureate or run a great foundation. Sometimes a poet has to get to middle age before people realize how much better she is than the poets around her.

We were talking about doctors when I saw the
blowfish,
green as the greenest apple, puffed-up and
bobbing in the shallows.
But when I looked again, it was only a pair of
bathing trunks,
ballooning out, aimlessly knocked back and
forth by the tide.
Ahead, the cruise ships lay at anchor in the
harbor.
At noon they'd slip away, like days we couldn't
hold onto,
dropping over the blurred blue horizon to
other ports of call.
The hotels we were passing all looked out to
water,
a thousand beach chairs in the sand looked
out to water,
but no one sat there early in the morning.
And no one
slept in the empty hammock at the Governor's
House
where workmen in grey coveralls raked the
seaweed into piles,
until the sand was white and smooth,
like paper not yet written on.

The ghost in the style is Elizabeth Bishop, whose sprightly "Arrival at Santos" has been darkened until the echoes become part of the tide's erasures. The lines extend slightly past the condensation of poetry, until their leisure, their prosaic view, no longer conceals the mortality within. Spires enjoys a distracted kind of poem-making—she notices things, then other things, notices (with curious dispassion) even the emotion in herself. She uses trivial domestic incidents, letting them deepen almost carelessly, past suggestion into meaning: many poets start with the dross and chaff, but most end there, too.

2 *Now the Green Blade Rises*, by Elizabeth Spires; W. W. Norton, 77 pages, $21.95.

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Spires is best at the blunted edge of pain, the shiver of regret or whisper of longing—all her memories prepare for loss. (Some of her poems read as if she'd waited for inspiration, but the inspiration never came). The good poems look less like achievements than accidents—the poems on her mother's death leave me cold (a harsh thing for even a critic to say), yet the parents and lovers and children of worse poets die all the time without the reader shedding a tear. If you saw the obituaries you might be touched; but life, however tragic, becomes art only when the poet provides something beyond the banality of circumstance.

Spires's modest, untemperamental character is ill-suited to strong feeling. Her poems are rarely cruel or moving—she's too eager to be mild (sometimes too eager to be mawkish, too); yet, when her poems recognize the feelings averted or avoided, the recognitions betray the sins of generations:

> You've left an envelope. Inside, your black
> pearl earrings
> and a note: *Your grandmother's. Good.* In
> ink the color of mourning.
>
> I remember the songs you used to sing. Blue
> morning glories on the vine.
> An owl in the tree of heaven. All of my
> childhood's sacred mornings.
>
> Your mother before you. Her mother before
> her. I, before my daughter.
> *It's simple*, I hear you explain. *We are all*
> *daughters in mourning.*
>
> I was your namesake, a firstborn *Elizabeth*
> entering
> the world on a May morning. I cannot go
> back to that morning.

The ghazal is such an overused and now cheapened form, it's shocking to read one so tender.

Few of Spires's best poems are driven by necessity. This can be an agreeable quality, when so many poets look like blowfish and turn out to be bathing trunks. Yet it's one thing to borrow the manners of prose, another to let a prose laxness spoil the writing. (A poet who employs a literary diction shouldn't be guilty of so many split infinitives or phrases like "each in our own . . . way" and "who was walking who.") The overuse of rhetorical questions (she's another addict), the faux naiveté (which worked for Bishop, but has worked for few others since), the bland phrases like "hot heat" and "white as snow"—sometimes it's hard to tell simplicity from mere cliché. Perhaps it's the more remarkable that with limited means Spires reaches such pressures of feeling (she's like a diver plunging a thousand feet into the sea with only a fishbowl over her head). In eight or ten of the poems here, she makes the demands of myth—the moment when the daughter Persephone becomes a Demeter—look like a moral responsibility.

Mark Doty loves to tug at the heart strings—some of the poems in *Source*[3] have chamber quartets swelling behind them (others have whole symphony orchestras). He's a poet with a gift for description, a taste for winsome subjects, an addiction to images of light (less now than in earlier books), and a narcissism all his own.

Doty's new poems were written under the gentle influence of Walt Whitman, not his style but his broad, generous character. After Whitman, however, do we need a poet who looks at everything with awe, who has epiphanies in gym showers ("men, all girths and degrees of furred// and smooth, firm and softened, fish-belly/ to warm rose to midnight's dimmest spaces/ between stars") and writes elegies for dead bunnies? If you hug every tree on the lot, if you love *everything* you see (Doty could make a garbage can a thing of beauty), isn't it hard to tell one thing from another? You're just the sum of your gimcrack, greeting-card sentimentalities.

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3 *Source*, by Mark Doty; HarperCollins, 76 pages, $22.

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Doty's giddy immersion in humanity sometimes sounds like a pep talk for American business, like things Stephen Vincent Benet wrote in the thirties. "We drove," Doty writes,

> to Fred Meyer, a sort of omnistore,
> for saline solution, gym shorts, a rake.
> In the big store's warmth and open
> embrace
> who could I think of but you? We were
>
> Americans there—working, corporate,
> bikers, fancy wives, Hispanic ladies
> with seriously loaded shopping carts,
> one deftly accessorized crossdresser,
>
> Indian kids in the ruins of their inheritance,
> loading up on Easter candy, all of us
> standing,
> khakis to jeans, in the bond of our common
> needs.

Our common needs! If you want to torture some spy, read him passages like that and you'll have his state secrets in no time. Poems that grind away in trivia eventually become trivial—banner emotions and a booster's good intentions aren't enough. Doty loves to make poems from the trash that is the world (though when you rub the reader's nose in trash, you start a course in aversion therapy): if such poems were prose, they'd look like this:

> Marie read poems, and Michael—in a thrift-store retro ensemble that meant *I want a boyfriend*—made his literary debut. Someone played the spoons. Davíd, who'd said our town averaged that year a funeral a week, did a performance piece about the unreliability of language. Someone showed slides: family snapshots tinted the colors of a bruise.

The only thing worse than seeing someone's snapshots is being told about them. Doty's eyes-raised worship of the human is conducted with sickening hushed solemnity ("Here is some halo/ the living made together"); but is it enough to change Whitman's "Every one that sleeps is beautiful" to "Every one who shops is/ also lovely"? Is that all Whitman's vision has led to?

Doty's so busy preening, he falls victim to hilarious verbal blunders. What's the poor reader to make of "how each dog's any,// every lemon-scaled/ fandango in the restaurant tank/ the perfect incarnation// of carp?" (You see something's wrong and realize he means something like *how each dog is the same as any dog*, but not before you've seen those poor mutts thrashing among the fish.) What of "lusters preserved/ by the taxidermist's wax, or the case/ in which he perched"?

Doty should be more than a glam poet who can write passages of hypnotic, alien beauty ("jellyfish/ of a horrifying red, escaped Victorian curtains/ trailing ferocious tatters,// whips and fringes pulsing freely,/ electrically—lion's manes, they're called"). Too often he renders a world not transformed, just lacquered and varnished with a FOR SALE sign attached. If you hired him to design your house, it would end up looking like Versailles on a quarter acre, with gushing baroque fountains (concrete, not marble) and interiors by Liberace. Such cheap profusion, such indulgent excess, is close to cloying vanity. You get a hint of Doty's deeper wounds, of compromised fragility and sad vulnerability, then he lights up his lines like Las Vegas and tries to sell you tickets to the floor show.

I have nothing against the sublime, as far as I know. Americans, democrats that we are, believe the sublime can inhabit almost anything—Yosemite and yard sales, ruins and rotisseries, fallen oaks and fallen women. The wish for the sublime infects even the suburbs full of Emersonian independents. (The suburbs were the Arcadia built for the city to escape to, but where can the suburbs escape to? The farm?) The more we look at a land ravaged in its beliefs and soiled in its aspirations, the more we might hope for an ideal elsewhere—transcendence is an American dream, and we have a lot to wish to transcend.

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B. H. Fairchild's *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*[4] is a pendant to *The Art of the Lathe* (1998), praised for its sentimental account of working life—his father's machine shop figured as the chief moral example. The new book returns again and again to the shop and the paternal lathe (his father threaded broken drill-pipe until high-speed diamond bits changed the oil industry), a world he writes of with absorbing affection and insulating nostalgia:

> They are gathered there, as I recall, in the
> descending light
> of Kansas autumn—the welder, the machinist,
> the foreman,
> the apprentice—with their homemade dinners
> in brown sacks lying before them on the
> broken rotary table.
> The shop lights have not yet come on. The
> sun ruffling
> the horizon of wheat fields lifts their gigantic
> shadows
> up over the lathes that stand momentarily still
> and immense.

They really made machinists and apprentices in those days. You see where the sentiments are tending (those brown sacks, those homemade dinners!), even before the men rise up like giants—but in Greek myth the giants had to be slain for us to inherit the world we have.

There's nothing wrong with making noble figures of factory workers—Stalin thought it a fine thing, and the good communist boilermakers who flexed their biceps in socialist realist painting were little different from the muscled coal-mining democrats in the post-office murals of the WPA. Long ago the Romantics had their shepherds, and before them Milton *his* shepherds, and before him Virgil and Theocritus *their* shepherds. There's nothing wrong with romanticizing the working man, except it's usually the work of a deskbound poet whose nearest brush with hard labor comes, these days, from what he sees in the movies.

There's nothing wrong with it, but does the lice-ridden shepherd or the coal miner dying from black lung ever feel quite so noble? I'm reminded of a poet who on the basis of a few long-ago weeks sweeping factory floors became the laureate of the factory floor. Even when Fairchild touches on the grinding boredom of nine-to-five jobs, there remains a varnish of romance—condescension disguised as apotheosis. Soon the poet's gaze, because he *is* a poet, turns instead to chokecherries that "gouge the purpled sky" or a sun that "dissolves behind the pearl-gray strands/ of a cirrus and the frayed, flaming branches/ along the creek"—gorgeous scenes, but like a lurid landscape by Bierstadt hanging behind a scrap pile.

Fairchild describes his machines as animals, and when they're not lunging or shuddering they're sobbing (the magic seems as penny-ante as Circe's). Auden was in love with machines, but the machines were fixed in a social and economic landscape—and besides, Auden was a genius. (You can't expect your reader to suffer from lathe envy very long.) To make the industrial sublime more than just a coat of oil and some cheap tears, you'd have to treat nostalgia with more disrespect. Fairchild loves the half-forgotten commerce and kitsch of the past—"decoder rings,/ submarines powered by baking soda," the Muriel cigar box, the Pontiac Chieftain, small businesses with names like Roman's Salvage and Beacon Hardware. It's like staring too long at a ragged poster for Moxie or Flit. The new romanticism has a sentimental attachment to the past simply because it is past—it believes the ordinary is significant *because* it is ordinary. The homely details are supposed to be redolent, like a morning madeleine, of time passed and misfortune embraced. *Sic transit gloria* Moxie.

> Out back in the welding shop where men were
> gods, Vulcans in black helmets, and the blaze
> of cutting torches hurled onto the ceiling the

4 *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, by B. H. Fairchild; W. W. Norton, 125 pages, $22.95.

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> gigantic shadows you watched as a child, place
> here the things of gods and children: baseball;
> a twilight double-header and the blue bowl of
> the sky as the lights came on; the fragrance of
> mown grass in the outfield; the story about the
> great pitcher, Moses Yellow Horse; your first
> double play at second base.

In the long prose-poem that closes the book, the machine shop becomes a version of Matteo Ricci's memory palace. Fairchild can write blank verse more fluent and supple than many of his peers (whose verse looks as if it had been turned on a lathe and then beaten with a ballpeen hammer); but even his prose wanders, like a prodigal son, miserably back to that shop. The poems have the sensibility of country-western lyrics, a mixture of orneriness and self-pity, free-style bulldogging and the trashy perfume of sentiment; though in the end the lives are no better than stereotypes. When Fairchild writes a strange uncompromising poem about the Crucifixion, you see what he might be, stripped of his obsessions. He's too busy now with his Vulcan machinists and smalltown hopes—when he writes of roustabouts "like Ascension angels" or baseball players who embody the "old dream, of men becoming gods/ or at the very least, as they remove/ their wings, being recognized as men," it's hard to keep a straight face.

A lot of foreigners have visited America and made it their business to tell us our business. We may never see our country the way others see it, yet without de Tocqueville or Mrs. Trollope or Dickens we'd know less about its manners and moods, its liberties and limitations. Sometimes we learn what we should have known all along, sometimes what we'd never have suspected. The foreigner is not just an innocent who sees freshly what we've grown stale to; he sees with different prejudices, not blind to what blinds us. When crowds gather to burn copies of *Domestic Manners of the Americans* or *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a nerve has been touched.

Glyn Maxwell's poems in *The Nerve*[5] do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay (sometimes you wish they were a little dishonest). He came to America as a graduate student and still sees it as a foreigner, with the eyes of an Englishman but the limestone common sense of Robert Frost.

> Nothing but snow about. A hunting man
> set out from his own truck and his sleeping
> son,
>
> who followed him, found no one, and was
> found
> five days later frozen to the ground.
>
> His father had been nothing but a fool.
> He went about his chores, he went to school
>
> for nothing, and he waited in his truck.
> The days were featureless and the nights black
>
> he drove into. He hunted in that place,
> he camped there in the trees, he heard the ice
>
> shifting in the branches. "Not the best,"
> his sister told a lady from the press,
>
> "the thing he did."

Nothing but a fool. The pronouns are shyly confusing, but the poem has Frost's dark appreciation of accident, of the difficulty of atonement. And what a beautifully pitched, terrible thing the sister says! Maxwell reminds us how much our poetry has lost with the decline of its moral function—we're all jaded habitués now, comfortable when people confess the most shocking things (and bored silly by most things they confess).

Maxwell is hardly a flashy poet. (His early work was wicked in an Audenesque way, without Auden's demonic language or perverse views.) If you read too fast, you miss his subtlety, his artful measure of speech. He's a poet you have to read twice, yet he

5 *The Nerve*, by Glyn Maxwell; Houghton Mifflin, 58 pages, $22.

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almost never uses a striking word—similes and metaphors are so rare he must shop for them at Neiman-Marcus. But in the judgments delivered and the morals drawn (such judgments are about having character), he reveals more of himself than poets who tell all. Though one or two poems look back toward the country he abandoned, a choice has been made and a bargain struck—he's writing about home now, a home by choice.

> I made my child a promise, so a weight
> was passed to her. I saw how carefully
>
> its power was handled, that it lit the thoughts
> around it, and I felt it warm her talk
>
> and urge the hours along. Since I, like you,
> no longer know a word like that, the light
>
> she gained was lost to me. It didn't mean
> I'd let her down—I didn't—but I seemed
>
> to be aligned with those who might in time,
> as if I'd somehow set coordinates.

The simplicity makes it seem simple, but Maxwell knows how to tell stories without making the reader impatient. Sometimes he slaps together a tedious poem from the tedium of life (what could be greater drudgery—in a poem—than a football game?); and his short poems are slight and whimsical, though he has a talent for song. But a poet capable of lines about a farm "selling its things to everyone whose plans/ had ground to a stop on the road that afternoon," or lovers in love "till what they'd happened on// would seem to have been waiting" understands what Frost was getting at, and why Frost's pentameter is American as a blue-plate special. To see an Englishman remake himself this way makes me uneasy; yet Frost's Yankees were not far removed from the stubborn ancestors who left minor villages and towns across England, places like Boston and Plymouth and Manchester, men who in hope named their new homes Providence and New Haven and in memory New Jersey and New York.

So many British and Irish poets have settled here in the past twenty years you wonder who's minding the shop back home. Having Glyn Maxwell, Eavan Boland, Geoffrey Hill, Paul Muldoon, and many another in this country would be, if only we knew how to take advantage of them, a provocation to our pretty concerns—but the losses to British and Irish poetry have been devastating.

Things happen in Paul Muldoon's poems that don't happen anywhere else—I'd call *Moy Sand and Gravel*[6] the Irish version of magic realism, if it didn't imply that the local haylofts were infested with faeries and the bogs with leprechauns. This wearyingly gifted poet published his first book at twenty-one and has hardly stopped to breathe since—he's the best joker in English poetry since W. H. Auden. He loves the sound of words and loves even better that by accident they have meanings, too:

> To come out of the Olympic Cinema and be
> taken aback
> by how, in the time it took a dolly to travel
> along its little track
> to the point where two movie stars' heads
> had come together smackety-smack
> and their kiss filled the whole screen,
>
> those two great towers directly across the
> road
> at Moy Sand and Gravel
> had already washed, at least once, what had
> flowed
> or been dredged from the Blackwater's bed
> and were washing it again, load by load,
> as if washing might make it clean.

Smackety-smack! The delight in lingo and jargon and dialect (and nonsense) throws words into violent juxtaposition (not Horace's *concordia discors*, but Johnson's *discordia concors*) and brings individual lines under great linguistic pressure. The cinema—that symbol of the modern, fantasy, Manifest

6 *Moy Sand and Gravel*, by Paul Muldoon; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 107 pages, $22.

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Destiny, the outer world—faces the local gravel plant, slowly (or rapidly) gobbling up home ground for sale. The *dolly* is just a camera platform, a word tainted by children's dolls, by old slang for women—Muldoon adores such contamination. And don't those two great towers mimic the giant screen lovers? On one side of the street, Hollywood sexuality, the bright lights of elsewhere; on the other the slow grinding of day jobs and the sale of ancestry. Some sins, like Lady Macbeth's, can't be washed clean.

Muldoon's giddiness reminds you of Auden, without ever being Audenesque (sometimes Muldoon pores over an Irish dialect dictionary the way Auden used to pore over the *OED*). Muldoon is always going too far, then turning around and smirking, as if to say, "I could go a great deal farther, then stand on my head and juggle pomegranates with my feet!" A reader can only shake his head and say quietly, "But you don't need to show off, and besides it's so much better when you don't."

Muldoon sets himself impossible labors and then exceeds them. (He's a Hercules looking for chores ever more Herculean. One critic noticed that several of his long poems use the same ninety rhyme-sounds, *in the same order*—sometimes repeated in *reverse* order.) He can make a poem from his baby son, a local flood, Irish navvies, gangsters, the Chicago Black Sox, the Holocaust—all interspersed with what officials call signage (PLEASE EXAMINE YOUR CHANGE, NO TURN ON RED). He'll write a poem where the first nine lines end with *draw*, each time with a different meaning. Or one where various words have been replaced by *something* ("the plowboy was something his something as I nibbled the lobe/ of her right ear"—not since Chuck Berry's "My Ding-A-Ling-A-Ling" has a line so needed to have its mouth washed out with soap).

Some of these poems misfire, but Muldoon doesn't care about failure. He's too busy thinking up another showoff stunt, pulling a rabbit—no, a rabbet; no, a rebbe; no, a rebate—out of a hat. The jokes can be tiresome, because they lose sight of his serious themes: the violence in Ireland; the loss of heritage; the ways in which language secretly, sniggeringly, reveals us (*Ad astra per triviis* might be the family motto). His poems—manic, uneasy, full of themselves—are so odd you think no one could do them well; when Muldoon does them anyway, you think no one else should do them, ever again (Muldoon had to leave Ireland to get away from all the Muldoon imitators).

When he quiets down, he writes as if he understood emotions and had even felt one or two of them:

> The paling posts we would tap into the
> ground with the flat of a spade
> more than thirty years ago,
> hammering them home then with a sledge
> and stringing them with wire to keep our oats
> from Miller's barley,
>
> are maxed out, multilayered whitethorns,
> affording us a broader, deeper shade
> than we ever decently hoped to know,
> so far-fetched does it seem, so far-flung from
> the hedge
> under which we now sit down to parley.

If this were Seamus Heaney, he'd make nature bear the burden of time passing, of age and the end of age, of changes wished for and unwished. Muldoon wants anything but what Heaney would—even if that means ignoring the feeling potent in the words (*parley* means more in a country where the violent sides must eventually sit down together). If Muldoon is to become a major poet, he'll have to leave some of the mannerisms behind, not because he can't juggle bowling pins and lawn chairs and chain saws (all at the same time), but because he can.

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Books

The lessons of Wellington

by Victor Davis Hanson

Perhaps with the exception of Churchill, England has produced no more a remarkable man of action than the Duke of Wellington, who put an end to the Napoleonic Wars at Waterloo—nearly six million dead and twenty-three years after France's mad genius first declared war against Austria in 1792. He was as effective an organizer and logistician as Lords Roberts, Wolseley, and Kitchener. But unlike his successors he crafted a method of war for his times that transcended the theater of his command, and so could prove as deadly to European adversaries as to colonials.

Born Arthur Wesley to a shaky aristocratic family (which later changed the spelling to Wellesley), the future duke showed no unusual talent as a student. His early military commissions were the results of purchase and family connections, culminating in a command in India granted largely through the interventions of his talented brother Richard, the Governor-General. Indeed, after borrowing to buy a captaincy, majority, and colonelcy, he found himself in debt to almost everyone from close family members to his boot maker.

Yet when he was at last in a position of authority, Wellington immediately showed the hallmark signs of brilliance that would characterize the next twenty years of his military career, resulting in the costly, but dazzling victory over the Marathas at Assaye, followed by further wins at Argaum and Gawlighur that crushed most resistance in British India. In less than a decade, from 1796 to 1805, he provided the muscle to enforce his brother Richard's brilliant organizational and political craft, cementing the foundations of the British Raj for the next century, through a series of rapid constabulary actions and decisive battles where he developed his trademark attention to defense and logistics.

Recalled to England in 1805, he married, and within three years he was off again to Portugal and Spain. There he kept the Grande Armée at bay in the Iberian Peninsula off and on for a decade, before meeting his destiny at Waterloo in 1815. Conventional odds were against him in Europe since England's strength was in her navy, with only a small professional army trained for colonial skirmishing, one hardly equipped to face modern continental forces that were blessed by superior technology and bolstered by a vast *levée en masse*.

No matter—Wellington never really lost to the French, whose generals drew on a population pool nearly three times as large as England's and claimed they sought empire for the brotherhood of man. In retirement as the Grand Old Man, the Duke finished out the last thirty-six years of his long life as Prime Minister, Chancellor at Oxford, Commander-in-Chief of the army, and acclaimed senior spokesman of British aristocracy. He died peacefully at eighty-three in September 1852—with Napoleon's nephew Louis poised to stage a coup and

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declare himself emperor of France. At his funeral at St. Paul's, a list of well over fifty honors and titles were read aloud—Knight of this, Earl of that, Duke so and so, with a generous splash of Rangers, Masters, Governors, Grandees, and Lords.

All biographers dwell on his contradictions, both personal and professional. Austere and often cold, respected but not liked, his competence and dependability nevertheless won him real loyalty from his men—whom he felt for the most part were the dregs of the earth. Properly married, he was rumored to have enjoyed several mistresses. Scrupulously honest, Wellington nevertheless came home from India a wealthy man as a result of his own lion's share of the spoils of battle. Without an aristocrat's classical education, he wrote more polished English prose than most scholars, spoke a number of languages, and read veraciously.

In an age of the emergence of growing staffs, Wellington attended to almost all his business first-hand. If Napoleon's head was stuffed with grand ideas of empire and huge continental armies, all as a means to establish a Europe based on post-revolutionary principles, Wellington's mind was instead full of logistical problems in moving a few thousand men in and out of battle, and setting them in defensive positions on reverse slopes where in relative safety they could blast apart columns of infantry approaching with real revolutionary élan. Waterloo proved the latter's experience and expertise to be the more valuable in the greatest battle of the nineteenth century, leaving military historians in a quandary ever since as to what properly constitutes real prerequisite battlefield genius—prior command of two-thirds of a million troops all over Europe or years at the front with 75,000 in a local theater.

Wellington was not prone to flashy aphorisms like Napoleon, but on occasion his reasoned remarks are more apt to stay with us. "They came on in the same old way, and we sent them back in the same old way," he scoffed of the destruction of the Old Guard at Waterloo. And when refusing a suggestion to target Napoleon across the battlefield, he barked, "I'll not allow it. It is not the business of commanders to be firing upon one another." Wellington rarely lost and never lost big. Before he assumed command, the British army was a beaten force of little repute, a mere ancillary to the grand navy; after him, it proved that man for man it was the best in the world. He was utterly unshakeable throughout Waterloo when his army often tottered on the brink: "I looked oftener at my watch than at anything else. I knew if my troops could keep their position till night, that I must be joined by troops from Blücher before morning."

Gordon Corrigan's life of Wellington[1] is very laudatory—"the greatest British general of any age"—and very British, written by a former officer and so mostly focused on Wellington as a great captain of the army. In Corrigan's see-no-evil, hear-no-evil hagiography, rumors about Wellington's women are ill-founded; widespread enmity was usually without cause and the wages of envy. In short, Corrigan reminds us that "In an age where self-interest was the norm and morality a middle-class responsibility, Wellington's life shines out."

Wellington may well have been a prig of sorts, but his poorly disguised contempt for the English poor in the great age of British reform politics is more than balanced by his sterling character. Look to what he did, not what he said, Corrigan reminds us. Repeatedly he ensured that his men were fed and well taken care of. He wept at news of his army's battle losses—twenty-seven percent casualties at Assaye and twenty-eight at Waterloo—and defined compassion through his own military competence that ensured his men won and were treated well in victory. The very idea that he would enter a warm carriage to abandon a freezing English army in Russia or flee a mess in Egypt as did Napoleon ("In war men are nothing: it is a man who is everything") is

1 *Wellington: A Military Life*, by Gordon Corrigan; Hambledon Press, 400 pages, $30.

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preposterous. At Waterloo he lamented, "I do not know what it is to lose a battle, but certainly nothing can be more painful than to win one with the loss of so many of one's friends." His officers returned his affection, one writing that the mere sight of the Duke's long nose was worth more than 10,000 reinforcements. This was a man, after all, who could write sterling prose nonstop to dozens of subordinates and then jump on his horse and ride eighty miles in two days, all cross-country through a difficult landscape. At Waterloo Wellington was as robust as a man thirty; the similarly forty-six-year-old Napoleon was in sorry shape and as lethargic as a man three decades his senior.

If Corrigan sometimes sees a one-dimensional Wellington as an embodiment of English virtue, his military history nevertheless makes fascinating reading and is a tribute to the old-fashioned narrative art that looks at deeds and concrete achievements rather than motivations and inner angst. We also glean invaluable knowledge about the distinctions between grape and canister shot, careful tutorials about loading and shooting muskets, and Wellington's remarkable constitution that allowed him little sleep while riding vast distances nearly nonstop for hours on end. The prose is engaging, the historical judgment sober and skeptical, and the documentation reliable—in short, precisely the sort of biography that reflects the best of traditional English military scholarship of a half century past.

Andrew Roberts is far trendier and presents a gossipy dual biography[2] of Wellington and Napoleon that offers juxtaposed narratives of their respective lives from birth to their dazzling funerals as he flips back and forth until their climactic meeting at Waterloo, and then chronicles their divergence again during Napoleon's last exile. Often his reliance on rumor and braggadocio would appall Corrigan—like the young French stage-actress Marguerite Josephine Weimer's purported respective scoring of Wellington and Napoleon in bed: "*Monsieur le Duc était de beaucoup le plus fort*." Roberts uses the superficial similarities between the two—same year of birth (1769), aristocratic background, lack of real formal education—as a backdrop to show how radically different men they were. He attributes much of the divergence to the difference between British and French national character that trumped their similar class and common European experiences.

Roberts dispels misconceptions of their much publicized mutual pique, and in its place shows how much more complex the rivalry was. Napoleon in retirement deprecated Wellington while privately admiring his talents—even as the latter was too much the gentleman to reveal how little he thought of the exiled megalomaniac, a man who once remarked, "At twenty-nine years of age I have exhausted everything. It only remains for me to become a complete egoist." If Napoleon thought it wise to scoff at the man who beat him, the far more critical Wellington wisely realized that to magnify Napoleon only cemented his own accomplishment. Or as Lucien Henry warned, "Those who would libel Napoleon rob Wellington of half his glory."

If Roberts is not so overt as Corrigan in his efforts to offer up Wellington as the embodiment of English virtue, his subtle comparisons with the more mercurial, exciting—and less moral—Napoleon nevertheless achieve that affect. As for the excuses that Napoleon was sick at Waterloo with an array of ailments from hemorrhoids to bladder obstruction, or that by 1815 he had lost his best men in Russia, or that General Comte Guyot had ignored orders, or that loose-cannon Marshal Grouchy was in the wrong place at the wrong time, or that the crazy Ney sent his lancers and cuirassiers in prematurely without orders, Roberts, like Corrigan, will have none of it. The real explanation for Waterloo was far simpler: after

2 *Napoleon & Wellington: The Battle of Waterloo and the Great Commanders Who Fought It*, by Andrew Roberts; Simon & Schuster, 349 pages, $27.

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delaying for critical hours in the morning when the British and Prussians were confused and hardly ready to fight, Napoleon then sent columns and horsemen en masse against disciplined shooters well protected either on reverse slopes or in solid squares. Napoleon—neither chance nor his marshals—lost the battle. And still, as Wellington pointed out, it was "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life" that might have still worked had not the Duke galloped over the lines steadying his men for hours on end. Napoleon, remember, not Wellington, had the more uniform, skilled, and veteran army.

Roberts demonstrates how Wellington utterly lacked anything of Napoleon's flair. Byron deprecated him and worshiped Napoleon, presaging the liberal creed of admiring those who profess a liking for humanity but hate people. The imperator emeritus himself wrongly blamed Wellington for his bleak exile on St. Helena, not appreciating that it was precisely Wellington who made sure his theatrical nemesis was not killed. While professing it was the humane influence of his own British Protestantism that had spared the tyrant, Wellington more likely possessed an astute sense of postbellum realities: it was key to the French disappointed sense of self that their emperor be defeated and exiled in shame rather than be killed in battle or executed as a martyr by haughty British.

Napoleon bore that magnanimity heavily, and made arrangements in his will to reward with 10,000 francs a failed assassin of Wellington. How hard it must have been to accept that Wellington beat him so badly, the sepoy general whose rope-a-dope strategy grew out of chronically small armies—and less lethal artillery, with few heavy lancers and no array of subordinate flashy marshals. Indeed, Wellington's armies were often scarcely a third English, and he never had more than 100,000 men under his total command. As Roberts shows, it is understandable that a genius like Napoleon would become exasperated with a perfectionist like Wellington who "had his number"—not unlike flashy table tennis stars who are finally worn down by mechanical opponents who for hours can methodically return even rocket serves back across the net.

Roberts ends by noting the irony that the grandiose plans of the European Union in Brussels represent the defeated Napoleon's vision of a united borderless Europe, without class frictions and joined by a common government—as if moderns have far less resonance with the parochial British victor and his aristocratic cronies. As he reminds us, Waterloo was fought a mere twelve miles from Brussels, the center of European collectivism, and thus history has perhaps come full-circle.

But that verdict, I think, is not quite in yet. And the very eccentric qualities that both Roberts and Corrigan note and praise in Wellington—aloof and detached analysis, willingness to fight alone and for principle, a firm unapologetic sense of national purpose and faith in Anglo exceptionalism—we Americans at least seem to appreciate the more. And so in our present crisis it is no accident that the United States finds far more dependable and moral the competent children of Wellington than it does the continental Europeans with all their grand utopian but ultimately empty moral pretensions.

What went wrong?

B. R. Myers Reader's Manifesto: An Attack on the Growing Pretentiousness in American Literary Prose. Melville House, 149 pages, $9.95

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Why is unmerited praise so annoying? The opposite sin, unmerited censure, we consider unjust and meet with indignation. But the misplaced compliment, the excess approval, the outsized reward given to what we know doesn't deserve it—that we find distasteful. Even in matters of culture,

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where the stakes are less immediate, undue favor gives offense. A bad novel is just a bad novel. We read twenty pages and toss it aside. But a good review of the novel sticks in our head, as if a trust has been violated. While the novelist speaks for himself, the critic speaks for a standard, and since the survival of culture depends upon a wary discrimination of virtue and vulgarity, his overly generous review plots a course of diminishing expectations. If others follow and we discern no ulterior motive, we can't even make a moral rejoinder. Something errant and unreasoning, it seems, is happening.

This is the animus behind B. R. Myers's *Reader's Manifesto*, an idiosyncratic tirade on the "Serious Writers" of our time and the reviewers and award-givers who sustain them. The project began when Myers came across one of the more critically admired sentences in recent years.

> In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thoughts of the strange place where he began, a so-called ranch on strange grounds at the south hinge of the Big Horn.

Myers's first reaction: "My God, that's a horrible sentence." He might have passed on, but the honors the author Annie Proulx has enjoyed (Pulitzer, National Book Award; *The Washington Post*: "the best prose stylist working in English now, bar none") demanded an explanation. He started collecting similar specimens of bad prose and critical puffs, parsing the writers' verbal errors and the reviewers' poor judgment. The result he self-published in March 2000 in a print run of 100 copies available only on Amazon.com. After four months of silence, a fan letter arrived from Bill Whitworth, a former editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. This was followed by a request from the current editor, Michael Kelly, that a shortened version appear in the magazine. When the July 2001 issue cast it as an indictment of "the GODAWFULNESS of today's literary writing," a minor storm erupted. *The Wall Street Journal* editorialized on its behalf, and papers from Sydney to Cairo to London to Arkansas hailed it as an "emperor-has-no-clothes" exposé. But the *New Yorker* editor Meghan O'Rourke wrote in Slate.com that Myers's "screed" was "crudely off target," and Laura Miller in Salon.com dismissed it as a "sort of bomb-throwing" that "appears every decade or so." An editor at *Harper's*, Lee Siegel, complained in the *Los Angeles Times* that Myers's "method of ripping imaginative prose out of its context is foolishly flawed." Michael Dirda of *The Washington Post*'s "Book World" answered online queries about the essay with, "Didn't read it, probably won't. I don't agree with the premise at all." When the paper of record joined the debate, Judith Shulevitz wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that Myers was an "outsider" who "doesn't have a sure grasp of the world he's attacking." In one letter to *The Atlantic*, the Editorial Director of Broadway Books called the polemic "annoying literary philistinism," while another dubbed Myers "embarrassingly mean-spirited." One fellow sighed, "I hope he is not this cruel in real life."

Now we have another version, issued by a tiny publisher in Hoboken. From the opening paragraphs, we see the respondents are right about the attitude. Myers is, he himself admits, "perversely ungrateful," truculent, and brash, and he manages to insult the preeminent writers, editors, critics, prize panels, and newspapers in the land. He applies the terms "scam" and "ruse" to sacred cows such as Toni Morrison, and mocks Pulitzer Prize-winning reviewers such as Michiko Kakutani. He drops epithets like "cultural elite," making it easy for literati to rate *Manifesto* the resentful bombast of an envious outsider. To do so, however, is to forget their own insider role in the current situation, for it is the elevation of mediocre writers by undiscerning critics at powerful institutions that turns Myers venomous.

More importantly, to focus on Myers

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—the "unknown," the "previously unpublished critic," the jerk—is to skirt the central thesis. That is: abetted by well-placed reviewers, an idiom has taken hold of contemporary fiction, one of repetitious phrases, slack descriptions, strained metaphors, and pretentious, vapid thoughts. To prove it, Myers selects five celebrities of Serious Literature—Proulx, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Paul Auster, and David Guterson—and meticulously analyzes their language. Here is his comment on the Proulx sentence above:

> A conceit must have been intended here, but "unfurling" or spreading-out, as of a flag or umbrella, clashes disastrously with the images of thread which follow. . . . A life is "unfurled," a man is "wound tight," a year is "spooled out," and still the barrage of metaphors continues with "kicked down," which might work in less crowded surroundings, though I doubt it, and "hinge," which is cute if you've never seen a hinge or a map of the Big Horns.

Elsewhere, the metaphors keep coming, labored, gratuitous, and mixed. In one story, a woman whose arms have been severed by sheet metal pauses to note the details around her. In an eighty-nine-word sentence, the just-mutilated woman stands "amazed, rooted," spying the grain in the floorboards, "jawed" paint on the wall, swallows darting and returning with bugs in their beaks "looking like moustaches," the house, the "wind-ripped sky," the windows, then finally the blood spurting from her elbows, her forearms thumping on the ground. The absurdity of a dismembered woman pausing to ruminate fancifully upon birds and floorboards didn't stop Walter Kendrick in *The New York Times* from judging this moment "brilliant prose."

Don DeLillo is the darling of hip critics and postmodern English professors. They adore his edgy send-up of consumer culture, the wavering comforts and ironies of our hyperreal existence. But to DeLillo's oft-quoted opening of *White Noise*, a commodity-heavy description of move-in day at a small college, Myers answers with a yawn. You "know what you're in for: a tale of Life in Consumerland, full of heavy irony, trite musings about advertising and materialism, and long, long lists of consumer artifacts." Laura Miller likes such litanies, claiming that DeLillo "has written glorious, unforgettable literary riffs" (she supplies no examples). Christopher Lehmann-Haupt admits DeLillo's books have flaws, but salutes their "brilliant writing" nonetheless. Myers chooses an example they would savor:

> In the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs . . .

The sentence goes on for fifty-nine words of supermarket fullness. Myers comments:

> Could the irony be any less subtle? And the tautology: "mass," "plenitude," "number"; "well-being," "contentment"! The clumsy echoes: "size," "sizes"; "familiar," "family"; "sense of," "sense of"; "well-being," "being"!

This tiresome reiteration, Myers says, baffles readers, but critics take it as a sign of superiority. Salon's Maria Russo proclaims, "If anyone has earned the right to bore us for our own good, it's Don DeLillo." John Leonard in *The New York Review of Books* counsels, "Since he is smarter than we are, trust him." So much for the canny irreverence DeLillo imparts!

Other writers commit similar blunders. Cormac McCarthy has a fatal penchant for what Myers calls the andelope, that is, simple declarative phrases linked by "and."

> He ate the last of the eggs and wiped the plate with the tortilla and ate the tortilla and drank the last of the coffee and wiped his mouth and looked up and thanked her.
>
> They caught up and set out each day in the dark before the day yet was and ate cold meat and biscuit and made no fire.

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This rambling, undifferentiated syntax strives for the sonorous breadth of Old Testament expression. Robert Hass in *The New York Times* thinks it a "witching repetition of words," and in 1992 the National Book Award judges said of *All the Pretty Horses*, "Not until now has the unhuman world been given its holy canon." "And yet," Myers counters, "it is ridiculous." McCarthy invokes it so relentlessly and matches it with such incongruous actions (eating a tortilla?) that a slight step of aesthetic distance turns it into bathos. "To record with the same majesty every aspect of a cowboy's life," Myers concludes, "from a knife fight to his lunchtime burrito, is to create what can only be described as kitsch."

The next writer on parade, Paul Auster, has a reputation for spare style, "a writerly obsession with compression and concision" (Kakutani). But in the passages Myers quotes, we find needless clarifications and cute intensifiers.

> Blue can only surmise what the case is not. To say what it is, however, is completely beyond him.

> My father was tight; my mother was extravagant. She spent; he didn't.

> Still and all, Mr. Bones was a dog. . . . [H]e was first and foremost the thing he appeared to be. Mr. Bow Wow. Monsieur Woof Woof. Sir Cur.

Generous readers might interpret these as Auster's hard awareness of the banality of life and the impotence of intellect. But when Lee Siegel reckons them "poetic variations that amplify meaning," when reviewers treat such habits as "the last word in gnomic control" (*The Washington Post*), one suspects that an inside joke is being played, or that gullibility has been added to the critic's toolkit.

Finally we have David Guterson, the author of the best-selling PEN/Faulkner-winner *Snow Falling on Cedars*. Myers is incredulous: "You could study . . . the whole novel for that matter, and find no trace of a flair for words." The prose is awkward, sluggish, redundant. Tautology serves as description: "Anything I said was a blunder, a faux pas"; "a clash of sound, discordant"; "She could see that he was angry, that he was holding it in, not exposing his rage"; "Wyman was gay, a homosexual." Straightforward facts are converted into stilted observations: "he had this view of things—that . . ." instead of "he believed that," and "It was not a thing you could explain to anybody, why it was that everything was folly . . ." for "you couldn't explain why everything was folly."

For each writer, Myers makes his case on verbal grounds, adding the laughable effusions of New York/Los Angeles/Washington D.C. critics. It is hardly surprising, then, that they reacted to his polemic by changing the subject. O'Rourke trivialized the argument into a preference for "story" over "style," and Siegel called him a "proponent of phony populism" who favors "action movies in book form." In the Epilogue, Myers replies that these categories obscure the real distinction: not story vs. style or populist realism vs. imaginative difficulty, but good style vs. bad style, inventive difficulty vs. cheap difficulty. Others scolded him for being out of touch. "In reaches of the literary establishment Myers seems unfamiliar with," Shulevitz noted, Proulx and Guterson "have already been discounted." Miller echoed, "David Guterson's writing does seem murky and solemn, but isn't he a bit of a has-been, anyway?" If that's the case, Myers asks, how do we explain the acclaim both received just before he penned his attack?

As far as I know, the only critic who has defended the writers on verbal grounds is Adam Begley in a recent essay in *The New York Observer*. Begley finds Myers "consistently irritating," a "master of the cheap shot and the artful fudge." He analyzes a passage from DeLillo's *Underworld* describing a gang of boys gate-crashing a ball-game to show that it achieves the very lucidity and

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power that Myers denies. But here is DeLillo's final sentence:

> The shout of the motley boys comes banging off the deep concrete.

The first problem is a semantic one: a crowd of boys may be motley, but the boys themselves cannot. A second problem: the verb "comes banging" is clunky. Finally: why call the concrete "deep"? To differentiate it from "shallow"? From the narrator's perspective, watching the boys rush past, no such distinction could be perceived. If Begley thinks this is great writing, well, he proves Myers's point. The arbitration of literary culture is in the hands of persons adept at puffery and doubtful in taste. They are also jealous of their turf, and when a rival critique comes along, they shoot the messenger. But why should we expect them to read the critique any more carefully than they read contemporary literature?

Beyond morality

Constance Brown Kuriyama Christopher Marlowe: a Renaissance Life.
Cornell University Press, 304 pages, $35

reviewed by Paul Dean

Christopher Marlowe's life lasted for twenty-nine years and three months, that is, about 10,670 days, and more attention has been paid to the last day of it, Wednesday, May 30, 1593, than to any other. On that day Marlowe, who had been summoned before the Privy Council ten days earlier for reasons that remain obscure, was stabbed in a Deptford tavern by Ingram Frizer after a dispute over the bill for their food and drink. Frizer and the other diners, Nicholas Skeres and Robert Poley, were on the fringes of government espionage, as Marlowe himself had been. A coroner's inquest found that Frizer had acted in self-defense, and the matter was dropped. This has led to suspicion that Marlowe's death was a political assassination, a case made most elaborately by Charles Nicholl. Nicholl's *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (1992) argued that Marlowe was killed on the orders of the Earl of Essex, with whom Skeres was linked, because Marlowe was an associate of Essex's rival, Sir Walter Raleigh, and that the quarrel story was an official cover-up.

The most valuable parts of Nicholl's book are his investigations into the workings of the intelligence agency masterminded by Elizabeth's Secretary of State, Francis Walsingham. Constance Brown Kuriyama is coolly sceptical about Nicholl's account of Marlowe's death. She doubts that Marlowe was important enough to be a target for Essex and points out that Raleigh's influence at court was in any case on the wane. The witnesses swore that Marlowe had attacked Frizer without warning, behavior which seems entirely characteristic of him; his one-time roommate Thomas Kyd ascribed to him "rashness in attempting sudden privy injuries to men." "Most of the grounds for suspicion," Kuriyama concludes, "seem baseless on dispassionate examination." Dispassionateness is a key characteristic of Kuriyama's book; her instinct is to take the heat out of everything.

The story of Marlowe's life, unlike that of his death, is quickly told. Born in 1564, the same year as Shakespeare, he was the son of a Canterbury shoemaker. After the King's School, Canterbury, he went to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where a possible portrait of him can still be seen. Several otherwise unexplained absences from Cambridge may be illuminated by a letter to the university authorities from the Privy Council in 1587, urging that he be allowed to proceed to the M.A. degree because of his "good service" to the Queen, and scotching rumors that he was about to join the Catholic seminary at Rheims. Instead of taking holy orders, as he might have been expected to do, Marlowe gravitated to the London theatrical scene and wrote six plays within as many years. His translations of Ovid's *Amores* and Book

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I of Lucan's *Pharsalia* may belong to the same period; his original poetic masterpiece *Hero and Leander* was left unfinished at his death. His last four years are a catalogue of court appearances for suspected murder, counterfeiting, and sedition, interspersed with murky accusations of atheism, blasphemy, heresy, and crypto-Catholicism. The Privy Council may have been about to move against him, but following that afternoon in Deptford the rest was, not silence, but rumors. The most bizarre of these—that the body in the tavern was not Marlowe's but someone else's, and that he survived to write the plays of Shakespeare—began in 1819, and is still mentioned from time to time, despite its patent falsehood on every count of aesthetic judgment, let alone probability.

Kuriyama provides a clear narrative of all this, and does valuable service by reprinting and translating the documents, some of them hitherto hard to find, which are our authorities for the facts. (Her most fascinating exhibit is the inventory of the possessions of John Gresshop, briefly Marlowe's schoolmaster, which includes an astonishing number of books and affords rare evidence of an individual's literary tastes in the 1570s.) She also provides a succinct sketch of Marlowe's posthumous reputation, which went into eclipse after the Restoration, briefly resurfaced in the early nineteenth century in the work of Charles Lamb and J. P. Collier, and gathered momentum in the twentieth thanks to T. S. Eliot's essay of 1919. She shares none of these writers' excited response to the frissons and audacities of Marlowe's plays, which are mentioned at the appropriate times for purposes of documentation, not for literary appreciation or analysis. This is baffling, for there are few writers of the period whose life and work seem so closely allied. Admittedly there is the danger of an infinite regression, in which interpretation of Marlowe's plays and understanding of his character validate one another. However, such an excellent book as Lisa Hopkins's *Marlowe: A Literary Life* (Palgrave, 2000), ignored by Kuriyama, shows that the interconnections can be made without distortion: and, indeed, the gleefully shocking image which Marlowe created for himself seems modelled on his own protagonists. The remarks reported by his associates Thomas Kyd and Richard Baines are a startling medley of scoffing at the low literary quality of the gospels, the possible homosexuality of Jesus, the delights of tobacco and pederasty, and the palpable absurdity of religion. Conventionally, Kyd and Baines are seen as suspect witnesses, hoping to save their own skins. Kuriyama is typically level-headed, noting that Baines was a leading government informer and that "an informer who provided false and misleading information would soon be out of work"; moreover, even if he was malicious, he need not have been lying; "telling the truth can often do more damage." As for Kyd, while he was rebuffing charges of atheism, and the dead Marlowe was a convenient scapegoat, he may have been sincere in his distaste for his former fellow-lodger.

Would anyone be writing on Marlowe now, if he had not written plays? His poems would survive as among the most accomplished of the age (*Hero and Leander*, even though unfinished, seems to me more enjoyable than either of Shakespeare's narrative poems). Otherwise, we would hear of him as part swaggering ruffian, part assertively naughty schoolboy, a petty lawbreaker with a walk-on part in the grand drama of Elizabethan politics: in fact, pretty much what we have in Kuriyama's book. Marlowe the playwright is capable of exuberantly bad taste and excruciatingly monotonous verse on occasion, but where his imagination is aroused—as by brutality, fantasies of power, and the torturing importunities of sexuality—he commands an energy beyond the reach of most of his contemporaries. His plays are lineal descendants of the medieval drama, above all in their refusal to adopt a univocal tone (there were once comic scenes even in the mind-numbing *Tamburlaine*, we're told, which

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were omitted in the printing). The influence of Shakespeare is probably responsible for the relative steadiness of focus in *Edward II*: but elsewhere Marlowe runs riot. Eliot was absolutely accurate in calling *The Jew of Malta* a "savage farce"; comparing it with *The Merchant of Venice*, one has to say that Marlowe commands a range of tonalities which Shakespeare either doesn't permit himself, or—I'll risk suggesting—can't achieve. It is simply *beyond* morality.

Doctor Faustus remains Marlowe's masterpiece, and one of the greatest non-Shakespearean plays of the Renaissance, because of its brilliant fusion of the techniques of medieval morality drama—which locates moral choice in a world of absolutes transcending an individual's fluctuating mind and will—with a profound dramatization of psychological solipsism. Only *Macbeth*, among Shakespeare's plays, can match its quality of hallucinatory nightmare. The important point is not whether Faustus (like Luther and Hamlet, a graduate of Wittenberg) is saved or damned, but that he *believes* himself to be damned. Yet he is not simply a Calvinist stereotype; Marlowe concocts a breathtaking mixture of grandeur and squalor. The comic episodes, so long derided, are essential in showing the trivia for which Faustus has sold his soul, and hence for making his bargain all the more shocking and pitiful. In this play we can watch the Middle Ages turning into the Renaissance, and, like Orpheus, casting a wistful, fatal glance back. Yet what does Professor Kuriyama have to say about *Faustus*? That debates at Cambridge on the question of free will "may well have influenced" Marlowe; that the early date of composition (1588–1589) is to be preferred to the later (1591–1592); that the play "continued to be performed profitably in the 1600s and 1610s" and was still in print, in a contaminated version, in 1663. This does not set our pulses racing.

William Empson, in his posthumously published *Faustus and the Censor* (1987, again unmentioned by Kuriyama) argued, for once unconvincingly, that Marlowe intended to show Faustus becoming extinct rather than going to Hell. Finding a second-hand copy years ago, I took it gleefully to the till. The bookseller, glancing casually at the title, remarked as he took my money, "There's some more *showbiz* over there, sir." Empson and Marlowe would have loved that; one fears Professor Kuriyama might not find it so amusing.

Honor wagered

W. S. Merwin
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:
A New Verse Translation.
Knopf, 171 pages, $22

reviewed by John J. Miller

The image on the cover of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—the new translation of it by the poet W. S. Merwin, and just published by Knopf—chillingly captures one of the most striking scenes in all of English literature. A glowing green head looks like a luminescent version of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, and it's nearly as haunting. The eyes are wrong; in the poem, they're explicitly described as red, not white. Yet this single flaw is easy to forgive. The picture is unnerving, which is exactly as it should be.

The event it depicts occurs in the first part of the poem. As the knights of the Round Table gather for a Yuletide feast, King Arthur demands a "tale all new of some wonderful event." As if on command, a hulking figure bursts into the royal hall unannounced. Carrying a huge battle-axe and wearing no armor, he seems a barbaric throwback to a time before there was courtly chivalry. His most impressive quality of all, however, is his color: He is entirely green.

This otherworldly intruder mocks his hosts and challenges them to an absurd game. He will let one of the knights strike him with his axe, if in return he is allowed to deliver a blow of his own a year later. Arthur's nephew, Sir Gawain, accepts the

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bizarre offer. Just as he grips the axe, the Green Knight flashes some skin on his neck, daring the young man to behead him. In a fierce stroke, Gawain cuts straight through. The Green Knight's head drops to the floor, gushing blood. Arthur's men actually kick it around like a soccer ball. All the while, however, the Green Knight's body remains standing. It steps into the scrum, grabs the decapitated head by the hair, and lifts it up high. The severed thing actually speaks: See you in a year, Gawain. Then the Green Knight turns and goes, leaving behind a stunned audience.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight isn't really about the Green Knight; it's about Sir Gawain, and how he strives to keep his end of a deadly bargain. Yet the Green Knight is the poem's most fascinating character. C. S. Lewis has called him "as vivid and concrete as any image I have met in literature . . . as full of demoniac energy as old Karamazov, yet, in his own house, as jolly as a Dickensian Christmas host." Is he an incarnation of the devil? Some sinister trick of that Arthurian arch-villainess Morgan la Fay? Even when the poem finally identifies the Green Knight, at its conclusion, his real meaning remains obscure. In a foreword, Merwin rightly says the poem derives its "power and authority" from "the insistent presence of the unknown."

There is, indeed, plenty that isn't known about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. We don't know the name of the Gawain poet. We don't even know the name of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—if, in fact, it has one. The single manuscript that has survived provides no title. It comes to us through the collection of Sir Robert Cotton, a seventeenth-century gentleman whose library also has given us *Beowulf* and the Lindisfarne Gospel. A 1731 fire destroyed about a quarter of his priceless manuscripts, and our literature would be immeasurably poorer if the flames had spread further. It wasn't until 1839 that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* first appeared in print for public consumption.

What we do know is that the poem is one of the first great works of literature in a language that is recognizably English. It was probably written in the late fourteenth century, around the time of Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Canterbury Tales* are a bit difficult to read in the original, though it may be done with some assistance; Chaucer wrote in a London-based version of English that is a direct ancestor of the language we speak today. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, is written in a dialect, and it is a bit harder to crack. Its form of English—or Middle English, as the linguists call the language of the day—was based in the North West Midlands, and it is clearly more archaic than Chaucer's English. Even its poetic form, with a heavy emphasis on alliteration, looks backward to the Old English (which is essentially a foreign tongue) of *Beowulf*. Translation is probably the best means for experiencing it, except for genuine aficionados of Medieval lit.

The first great translator of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was that grand Oxford philologist J. R. R. Tolkien, who is better known as the author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's version is still widely used by students. Merwin is merely the latest competition to come along, though he is also different in that he approaches the poem not as a professor or an expert in Middle English, but as a poet in his own right. A native New Yorker who attended Princeton, Merwin was the tutor to the son of Robert Graves. In 1952, W. H. Auden identified him as a promising young talent. In 1970, he won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Carrier of Ladders*. He is also an admired translator of Dante, as well as other romance-language poetry. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* marks his first foray into the older forms of English. His publisher no doubt hopes to repeat the surprising commercial success Seamus Heaney had with *Beowulf* two years ago, when the Irishman turned that old standby of ninth-grade English into an international bestseller.

Every translator faces important choices, a give and take between authenticity and

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readability. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is no different. It was part of something scholars call the Alliterative Revival—a last-gasp movement that briefly breathed life into a dying form that had dominated English before the Norman invasion. Many translators of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, including Tolkien, have struggled to preserve its alliteration. In a foreword, however, Merwin writes that he did not want "to cramp and twist the lines in an effort to make an exact replica of a verse form in what has become, in six hundred years, another language." Alliteration is not absent from his rendition, but it also holds no special place.

Take the very first line of the ninth stanza, in the original:

Wel gay watz þis gome gered in grene

Here is how Tolkien translates it: "Very gay was this great man guised all in green." Tolkien hews to the original, even sticking with the G-sound, which not all translators do even when they're trying to keep the alliteration. The syntax isn't colloquial, but the line preserves an essence of the original.

Here is Merwin: "How splendid he looked, this knight in the green apparel." Merwin's is a bit easier to read, though it casts aside one of the poem's key poetic elements.

This isn't necessarily a poor decision. Merwin, in fact, has written what is probably the most readable version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. His edition reproduces the original language on the facing pages, which invites readers to keep tabs on their translator. Some will say Merwin sacrifices a unique and critical aspect of his text, and they will have a point. But consider: Would you prefer watching Shakespeare while standing in a crowded pit of people, as most Elizabethans experienced it, or while sitting in the cushioned seats of an air-conditioned theater? My own preference is for the latter, though someday I may try the former just to see what it's like.

There is obviously room for alliteration in English poetry, but it simply doesn't occupy the central place it once did, and this has been true for centuries. Today, meter and rhyme are more important. They are tools for the Gawain poet, but not fundamental features. (It must be said, however, that Merwin's failure to reproduce the rhyme in the couplets that conclude each stanza is difficult to understand; Tolkien managed it quite well without sacrificing readability.)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight may represent an older form of poetry, but what makes it fascinating is how it displays a more modern vision. Despite formal similarities with the literature of the Anglo-Saxons, it essentially rejects the chest-beating virtues of Beowulf in favor of newer, Christian ones. Like Beowulf, Sir Gawain is bold and brave. Yet he is also chaste, faithful, and patient—qualities that the Beowulf poet doesn't idealize. There is tension and violence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but not much in the way of monster-vanquishing combat. If Beowulf is a hero in the mold of Conan, Gawain is a champion in the service of something else.

There are two main parts to the story, both of them challenges thrust upon Gawain. The first is the initial encounter with the Green Knight, in which Gawain faces a public challenge and then confronts the grim task, a year later, of setting out to meet his apparent doom. The second part occurs shortly before he is scheduled to rendezvous with his nemesis. The wife of his host tries to seduce Gawain while her husband is away on a series of hunts. During this erotic temptation, Gawain is invited to violate every standard of courtly decency he has committed himself to uphold. It is a private challenge, in which Gawain must draw strength from the virtues that are more celebrated in the Christian world than the heroic one.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has been called a wintertime festival poem, a pagan Celtic tradition continued by Christian

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Britain, and its blend of ancient custom and modern belief is masterly. The themes of death and renewal are never far from the surface, and one of the most celebrated passages is a vivid description of the seasons changing as Gawain prepares to hold up his end of the strange deal he made with the Green Knight. In many primitive cultures, chastity must come before fertility, just as winter must come before spring—and Gawain has to keep his honor in the most trying of circumstances right before he places his life before the Green Knight's sharp axe.

There are other ways in which the poem updates the past. The opening lines are about Troy—they place King Arthur's court and ancient Britain within the context of Homer's world. In doing so, the Gawain poet pays homage to a literary inheritance. Merwin does the same thing when he chooses this subject for translation. He offers a fine version, and even purists who might quibble with what he's done must admit that it's a welcome trend for our leading poets to grapple with the English classics, at a time when so much other literature is unmoored from tradition.

Flamboyantly humble

Dave Eggers
You Shall Know Our Velocity.
McSweeney's Books, 376 pages, $21

reviewed by Max Watman

Dave Eggers, flamboyantly humble, ashamed of his success, wallowing in that same success, the biggest dork of all, has second-order vanity, bad. He has had it since he edited the irreverent, sometimes hilarious, and ultimately shallow *Might* magazine. He thinks quite a lot of himself, but he knows that is not good. Consider the author photo for his first book, the mega-block-buster *Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The photo is blurry; author photos do not matter to him. In the blurry picture, there are two dogs and a bird, as if he were saying: "Don't look at me, look at these two dogs, and this odd bird on my shoulder." The bio states that Eggers has no pets. "Think about it: there are three animals in the photo, none of them mine." One tends to look at the author photo for a very long time to figure out what is going on. Now everyone knows what he looks like. He is shrewd, this Eggers.

His first novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, is out from his own house, McSweeney's. There is no author photo. There is no dust jacket. There is a natural gray cardboard cover, with the first paragraph of the book printed on it in capital letters. The front-cover endpaper picks up the text. One is tempted to make comparisons to early Surrealist experiments with type, but remembers that actual type was a little trickier. When Sylvia Beach and James Joyce labored over the huge "S" ("Stately, plump"), they were laboring with blocks and lead, not simply increasing the font size in a floating palette in their desktop-publishing software. Eggers's trick was easy to do, and it does not warrant comparison to anything.

Print at your own press and you print on very thick paper (it took me fifty pages to stop checking that I hadn't turned two pages instead of one), and no one will stop you from inserting color photographs and many diagrams into the book. It seems copyediting, however, will not go well. There are rumors that Eggers is mean to those who criticize him, and I wonder if he fires editors who point out typos, dropped text, and left-in editorial notations. Someone clearly forgot, for instance, to wrap the text around a picture of a building on page 102, and as a result there is about a third of a page of copy lost. There is a scene early in the book in which the characters see three white Broncos, and they riff on white Broncos post-OJ ("how could they even make them in that color?"). Inserted into the text are three pictures of what appear to be Mercedes M-Class vehicles—decidedly not Broncos.

Perhaps he thinks that clean copy is a

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vanity, or a tool of the New York literati, at whom he is thumbing his nose by moving back to the West Coast and supporting independent bookstores. His repudiation strikes less charming notes, as well. The literary agent Elyse Cheney had to sue to receive her six-figure commission for the sale of his first book to the movies. Eggers is not against agents. He has a new agent: Andrew Wylie. One hand is thumb to nose; the other is signing a note thanking *The New Yorker* for publishing an excerpt of his novel.

This is the kind of contradiction of which Eggers is made. It is what makes him frustrating and endearing simultaneously. On top of all that, he tells you, often, that he is full of contradictions and criticizes his own maneuvers on the fly, like a solipsist Cicero in the throes of an endless refutatio.

You Shall Know Our Velocity is a Freudian novel, in which Will (the ego character) narrates the adventures he has with Hand (the id character) after the death of their friend Jack (the superego character). Jack, who obeyed the world's rules (never sped in cars, had a steady job, never understood the mischief of their childhood pranks), was killed in a car accident. Will has money that he doesn't like, which he made by inadvertently posing in silhouette while screwing in a light bulb. A light bulb company used the silhouette, and Will made $80,000. Now, tortured by the death of his superego, adrift, he wants to give the money away. He and Hand concoct a whirlwind one-week world tour during which they will hand out money.

Will says throughout the book that motion is important, that the whirlwind aspect of the tour is what counts, but whirl they do not. They do an awful lot of waiting and talking to airport clerks. We read itineraries no more artful than our own. They visit places in exotic locales, but it is usually late at night. Will and Hand see little. They end up at strip clubs. We have been, as readers, in many strip clubs, and Eggers's are unexceptional and dull. As they travel, they engage people by asking for directions, or approaching them and starting a conversation. Then they hand the person money. These scenes are cookie-cut throughout the book, repetitious until the last cathartic (though not for us) giveaway.

Eggers has talent, and that at which he is good is superlative. He can write wonderful sentences: "At the reception that night, outdoors under a strong-mooned sky, amid the whitest of tablecloths, amid the white chairs and so many lilies, we ate and bought cigars from the waiters on the sly and then everyone moved to the dancefloor and I didn't know if I could dance too but my pregnant friend pulled me out and, sober, I jumped around with her, as she laughed and laughed." He can sling strong similes. A powerboat slaps the surface of the water like "you slap a shoe on a summit table." He writes good athletic action. Jumping and running are excellent materials for Eggers.

But Eggers lacks scope. He cannot write women. They are all feline, wise, smooth moving things, or bitches; all but mom are on the angel-or-whore axis. He cannot move action. Two speeding cars seem to have trapped the rental, Will and Hand are convinced they are hurling towards ambush, and even this scene is boring. He has no sense of pace. He is inconsistent. Will in one scene says he has never been far from Chicago, and in another describes the light in Los Angeles. Will leaves a prostitute's apartment (they just cuddled, of course) at 4:30 and walks to his hotel. He arrives at midnight.

Much was expected from the follow up to *AHWOSG*. All of the tricks and foils that Eggers put to such excellent use in the memoir worked precisely because it was a memoir of personal tragedy. Here, they are less effective. Eggers's memoir was touching, intelligent, and wild. His sophomore effort is clumsy and uneven. Maybe vanity presses are just vain.

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Letters

Relatively speaking

To the Editors:
Keith Windschuttle's contributions to your magazine have often proved edifying, but his denunciation of Clifford Geertz ("The ethnocentrism of Clifford Geertz," October 2002) so egregiously misrepresents Geertz's work and sensibility that it cannot pass unchallenged.

In common with most cultural anthropologists, Geertz practices what is sometimes awkwardly called "cognitive relativism." This version of relativism holds that cultures can best be understood by assessing behaviors and beliefs within their total context. Thus, to take an outré example of the sort that Windschuttle favors, if one wants to comprehend human sacrifice as practiced by the Aztecs, one must study the internal framework of understanding within which such behavior was permissible or necessary.

To understand, of course, is not necessarily to pardon. Cognitive relativism does not lead inexorably to moral relativism, the view that any system of values is as good as any other. I'll take Windschuttle's word for it that moral relativists exist in anthropology, although I've never had occasion to meet one. If anything, moralizing comes all too easily to contemporary anthropologists.

Geertz himself has consistently argued against the fashionable claim that different cultures constitute "different worlds"—mutually unintelligible webs of action and meaning. Windschuttle gerrymanders his references to make Geertz seem responsible for every smirk and self-indulgence of postmodernism. More often than not, however, Geertz has been on the receiving end of postmodern critical bombast, indicted for his humanism and his firm belief that the Other is, despite the obstacles, ultimately knowable. True, Geertz has little time for the conventional pieties of parochial minds, but in this he differs little from other great Western thinkers. "If we wish to be able capaciously to judge, as of course we must," Geertz writes in one the essays that Windschuttle distorts so relentlessly, "we need to make ourselves able capaciously to see." I find it hard to believe that the educated readers of *The New Criterion* would find this assertion objectionable.

Michael F. Brown
Lambert Professor of Anthropology
Williams College
Williamstown, MA 01267

Keith Windschuttle replies
Professor Brown is right to say that if you want to comprehend the practices of other cultures you need to understand their internal framework of meaning. Historians and anthropologists do indeed need to try to think themselves into the mentalities of their subjects. But this does not mean that one has to subscribe to what Brown calls "cognitive relativism," since this term implies that different cultures inhabit different cognitive worlds. If this were really so, then the whole prospect of seeing things through others' eyes would be impossible. There has to be a common cognitive core and some kind of shared human nature for any translation to take place.

Brown is also correct to argue that to under-

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stand is not necessarily to pardon. He is, however, quite wrong to say the work of Clifford Geertz avoids this pitfall. In the examples I gave, Geertz was not only describing other cultures, he was positively glamorizing them. How else can you read his absurd claim about Balinese cockfighting? "What it does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, *Lear* and *Crime and Punishment* do." To argue that this cheap blood sport could possibly have the same cultural impact or provide the same cultural insight as these two great works of art is to elevate grotesquely the status of the former, and to relativize and belittle the latter. Geertz is making an unambiguous moral and aesthetic judgment, while at the same time flaunting before a domestic audience the novelty and exotica of far-away places.

As Brown should be aware, I am far from being the first or only critic to complain about Geertz along these lines. My argument that Geertz's "anti-anti-relativism" is actually a species of full-blown relativism is the same that Ernest Gellner made with much more elaboration in *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992). In that book, Gellner does not see Geertz as an opponent of the postmodernist movement but as one of its chief inspirations.

Similarly, in his illuminating work *Sick Societies* (1992), Robert Edgerton identifies Geertz as one of the main perpetrators of the radical relativism that underpins the whole multiculturalist movement. Edgerton writes: "Propelled into prominence by such distinguished anthropologists as Clifford Geertz and David M. Schneider, this epistemological form of relativism challenges more than one's ability to evaluate other cultures: it contends that cultures cannot even be compared. Cultures, this new relativism insists, are incommensurable; each one can only be understood, or more correctly interpreted, in its own terms as a unique system of meanings."

Geertz might not endorse and might even shrink from the consequences of his own theories, but Edgerton is right about what they logically entail.

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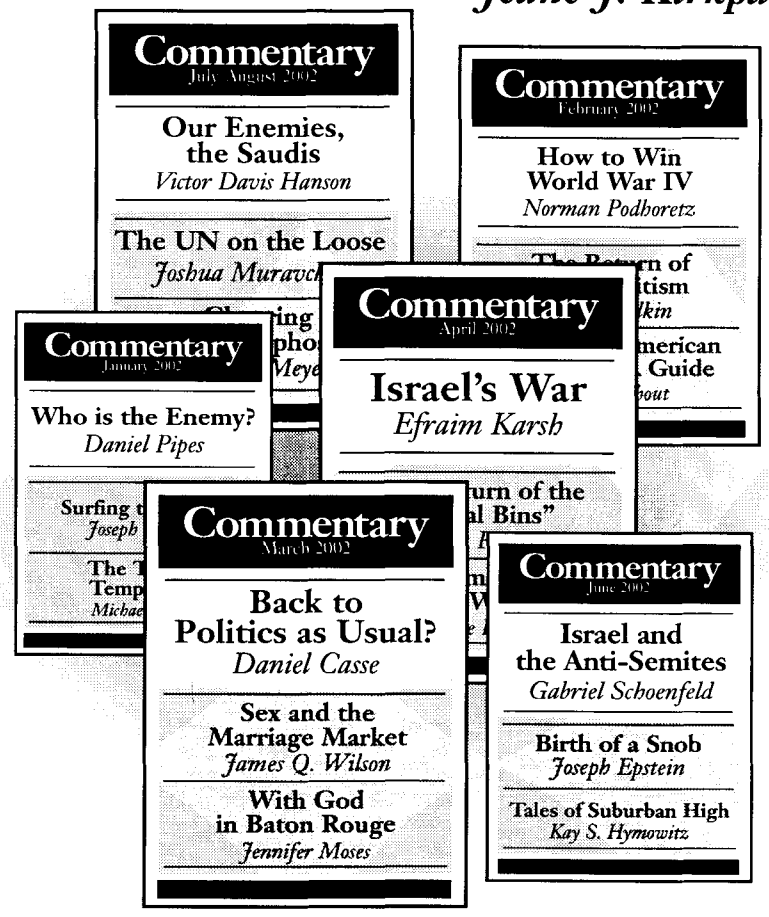

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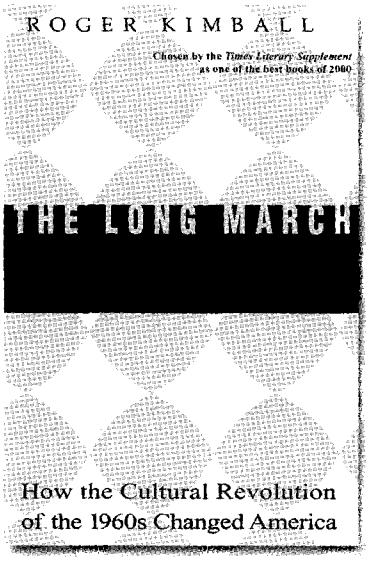
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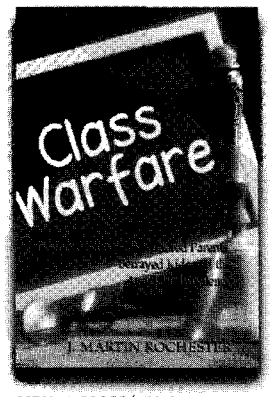

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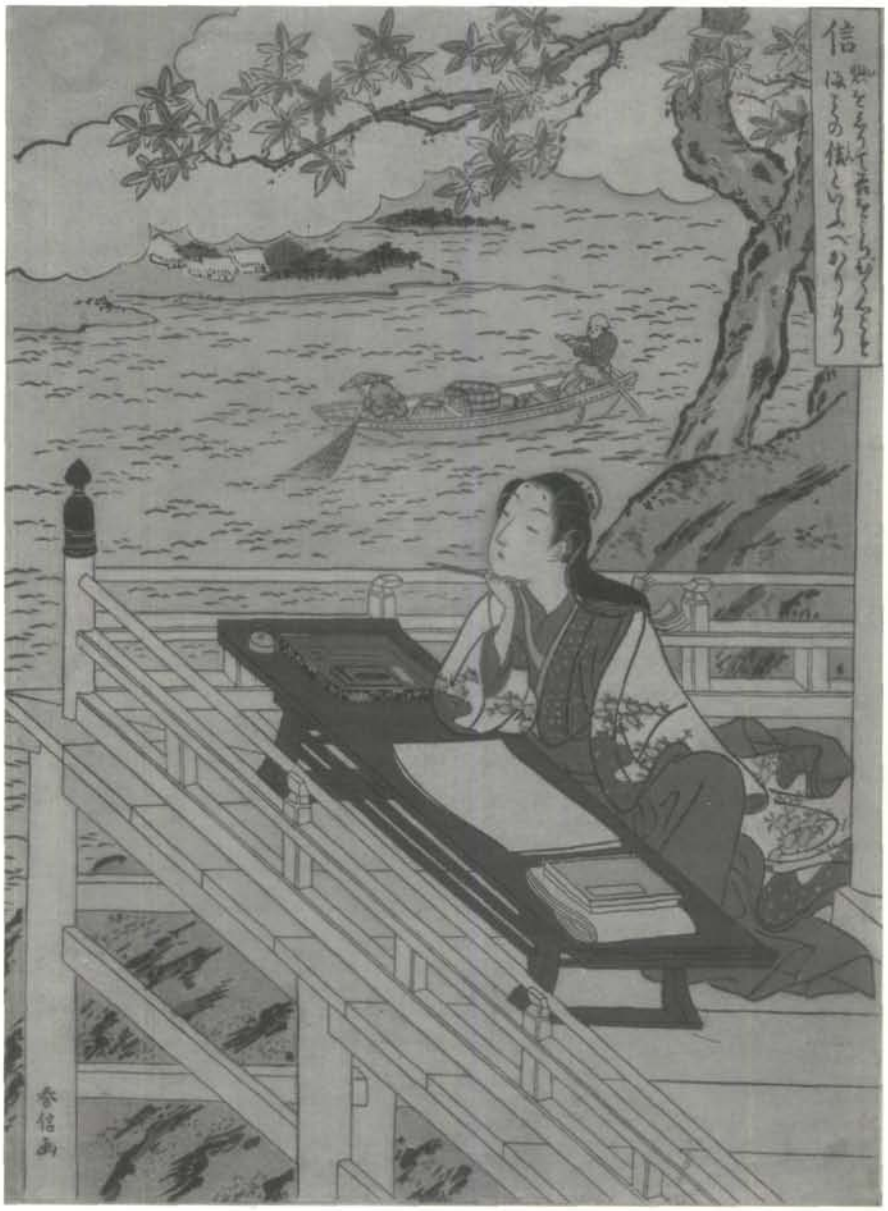

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